

An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 10

Fuminori Teshima

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**"Well
done, Lilith.
Henceforth,
we shall create
a grand bath
here in my
castle!"**

Zagan may have ushered Lilith in as his subordinate for this very moment. He flung open his mantle and descended from his throne towards her.

**AN
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ELFBRIDE**



In complete contrast to Dexia's excitement, Aristella was silently putting her spoon to work and had managed to stretch out all the way to the other side of the dessert.

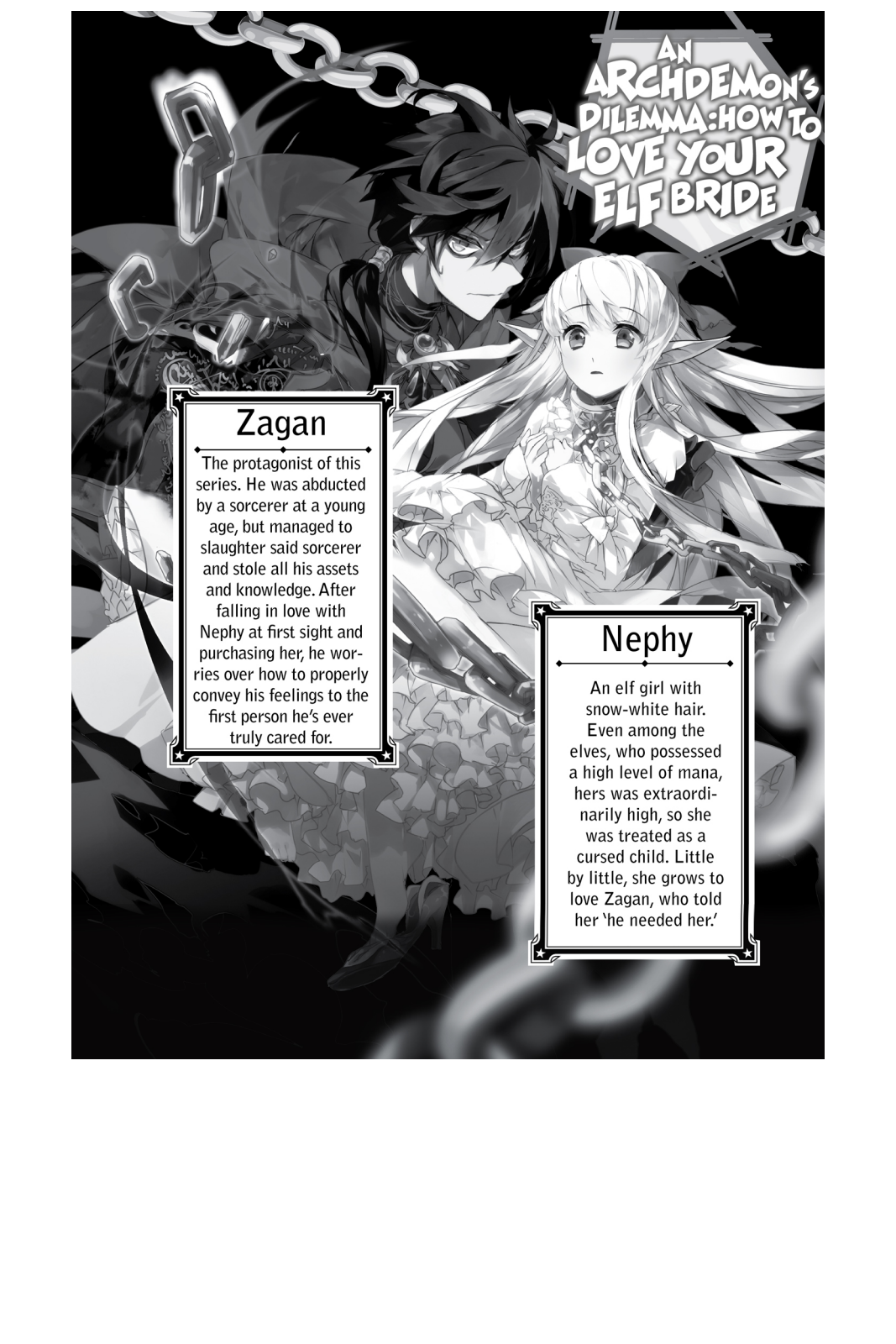
"So sweet! What's with this? Isn't it stupid to have so much sweetness? Mmmm... Hey! Aristella! That's my half!"

"We never decided anything like that."

""Oooh...""

The glass was large enough that one could mistake it for a vase. There was enough whipped cream and frozen sweets that one had to look up at it from the table. It truly was sufficient for both of them to share.



A black and white manga-style illustration. In the background, a dark, shadowy figure with long, spiky hair and a high-collared coat is partially visible. In the foreground, a young elf girl with long, flowing white hair and pointed ears is looking towards the viewer with a neutral expression. She is wearing a detailed, light-colored dress with ruffles and a high collar. A large, ornate banner in the upper right corner contains the title. Two text boxes with decorative borders are positioned in the lower half of the image, one for each character. Chains and metallic links are visible in the upper left and around the characters.

AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE

Zagan

The protagonist of this series. He was abducted by a sorcerer at a young age, but managed to slaughter said sorcerer and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephy at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings to the first person he's ever truly cared for.

Nephy

An elf girl with snow-white hair. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, hers was extraordinarily high, so she was treated as a cursed child. Little by little, she grows to love Zagan, who told her 'he needed her.'



Kuroka Adelhide

A blind cait sith. She once served in the church's secret assassination sect, Azazel, and excels in swordsmanship as a result. Currently a resident at Zagan's castle while she gets her eyesight repaired.



Shax

A sorcerer who excels in healing sorcery. He once worked under Shere Khan, but is now estranged from him. He's been getting along with Kuroka recently, which has drawn the ire of her foster father, Raphael.



Alshiera

A girl of the Night Clan who has actually lived for an extremely long time. Calls Zagan the "Silver-Eyed King". She has an understanding of history that has been lost to man, but tends to refuse to answer any questions about it for some reason.



Bifrons

An Archdemon whose gender is a complete mystery. After being crushed by Zagan, they had a curse cast on them. Currently working with Archdemon Shere Khan, but their goal is unknown.



Dexia and Aristella

Twins who serve as Shere Khan's subordinates. They are targeting Kuroka's group under order of Shere Khan, who has been continuing the rare species hunt. They look pretty much identical except for the side they tie up their hair.

Shere Khan

One of the Archdemons. The mastermind behind the rare species hunt, and also the one who destroyed Kuroka's hometown. He was supposedly purged by Archdemon Marchosias, but somehow survived and is now scheming with Bifrons.

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Prologue

“I keep telling you this, but you really should try smiling more often, Ashy.”

The young man before me, who was wearing round glasses, smiled in a troubled manner. His glasses were high-class goods, his hair was diligently combed back, and he wore trim and tidy clothing. His attire gave off the feeling of a chamberlain more than a noble, though it wasn't like he actually served anybody. According to him, those clothes made it easy to blend in even while in the city. He was carrying a long wrapped bundle on his back that looked like a fishing rod.

Upon being told to smile once more, I made my displeasure evident with my gaze. He knew I hated being called by that name, but he still continued to do so. The young man looked at me with his silver eyes and a refreshing smile. After we stared at each other like that for a while, he shrugged his shoulders and gave in.

“Well, I guess that's fine for now. More importantly, I've completed your request.”

His words brought my glare to a stop.

“So, could you perhaps stop looking at me like that...?”

I hadn't meant to keep glaring at him any longer, but apparently, that wasn't getting through. Not that it was any different from our usual interactions. The young man resigned himself and began unraveling the bundle on his back. He untied the rope, rolled out the parchment, and unveiled a rough looking steel cylinder.

“Overall length 1447.5 mm. 12.7 mm caliber. Overall weight 12.9 kilos. Muzzle velocity of 853 meters per second. It uses armor-piercing ammunition carved with draconic spells. It's capable of pulverizing a seraph's barrier from 2000 meters away.”

The lump of steel was longer than I was tall. This was a weapon we cooked up to help kill seraphs. However, I couldn't see anything 2000 meters away. As I informed him of that, the young man held up the weapon as if he was waiting for that exact question. And, at that point, I spotted another cylinder sitting atop the main barrel.

“Take a look through here. It's called a scope. It should allow you to see things that are far, far away. When you combine this with your skills, you should be able to snipe a target 2000 meters away.”

The young man went on to describe the weapon in great detail,

but I was only half-listening. With this, even I could fight against the seraphs.

My emotions, which had long since come to a standstill, threatened to break free of my chest. It seemed I was experiencing what most would call excitement. However, as I took hold of the weapon, I learned that this was but a shallow thought. It was far too heavy. Being just shy of 13 kilos was the same as tying multiple swords together. It could not be used at close range.

“I mean, that’s just the kind of weapon it is. The goal is to shoot them down before they even notice, remember? Besides, any human would die in close combat with a seraph, right?”

Aren’t I going to die anyway? I thought as I stared at him once more. And this time, he understood. The young man sat down next to me and sighed.

“Listen, Ashy, I understand you feel you have to face death. I can’t say much about that. Your despair belongs to you alone. Your motives are different from mine. But both Marchosias and I want you to live. If you live, you’ll surely...”

What were the words that followed after that? I couldn’t tell... I had been distracted by the young man patting my head. I hated having my head touched. Mostly because the proof of what made me one of my people was no longer there. It reminded me that it had been pulverized. This world was cruel to all humans. The world belonged to god and the seraphs. Humans were unnecessary. Those with useful skills were acknowledged as tools, but those who weren’t were cleansed.

There were many people like me in this world. Many went through far worse than me. One in ten people chose death after facing such despair. I had no reason to live precisely because that was the way the world turned. However, I couldn’t stand being tossed aside like garbage.

That was why I chose to fight. I would fight, fight, fight, and die. That I could agree to. And yet, they told me to live.

It wasn’t like I couldn’t understand their feelings. They had lent me their strength not so that I could die, but so that I could live. I said I wanted to fight, that I didn’t want to be something unnecessary, that I wanted to struggle against the seraphs. And they believed in me. I understood that.

I looked down at the weapon and questioned the young man, asking him what to call it.

“How about Marduk? It’s the name of a hero from a legend Orobas once told me. A hero would surely lend you their power.”

The young man would leave nothing behind for the future, not even his name. However, I knew. Even after a thousand years, I would

surely never forget because he was the hero who first granted me a faint feeling of hope in this small world.



“...A dream?” Alshiera woke up half in a daze in the large underground cave below Zagan’s castle. She had the disassembled Seraph Hunters, Stern and Mond, which were scattered about before her eyes. It seemed that she had fallen asleep in the middle of maintaining them. That was the first time in 500 years that she had fallen asleep on a table.

She let out a nostalgic sigh. How many years had it been since she’d even had a dream? It may very well have been several hundred years.

Her war had persisted ever since that day. She had fought, and fought, and fought, defeating many, many seraphs. She had made allies along the way who fought by her side. Those allies died, and many, many other people died as well. However, she kept strong, and there were still those who continued to struggle and those that she continued to try and save.

During that time, they created more Seraph Hunters aside from Marduk, but the only ones left within her grasp were the two before her eyes. Ironically, they were the Seraph Hunters meant for close quarters combat, which was supposed to be their last resort.

What was even more ironic was that even though she had wanted to die the most, she had ended up being the last survivor. It was laughable to say that the undead remained among the living, but that was the only way to express the matter.

She truly thought they were an irresponsible and selfish bunch. Even though they’d told her to live, they went and passed on before her.

“...Yes. I know. You obstinately told me to live, didn’t you, my Silver-Eyed King?”

The men Alshiera called by that name aside from Zagan had all expressed the same desire to her, so she couldn’t betray that.

Will the current Silver-Eyed King tell me the same thing one day? Well, Archdemons lived long lives. It was entirely possible the day would come where he would express such a notion. Although, she didn’t believe he would utter those words as he was now unless heaven and earth were flipped.

Alshiera clutched her side. Even now, she was slowly bleeding. It was an unhealable wound. Just how much longer would her life hold on? And, as that thought passed through her mind, she strained a smile.

I suppose I’m also selfish... She had spent a thousand years thinking

of death, and only now did she become attached to life. It truly was laughable.

At that exact moment, she heard footsteps approaching the cave. It was likely Zagan, as he was the only one who could freely enter this part of the castle. Alshiera quickly reassembled the Seraph Hunters and checked their condition. She had used them the other day to bash in a bunch of worthless louts, so some of the parts were damaged. There was likely a need to repair them before the final battle. However, one who wielded weapons was different from one who created them. Even after a thousand years of wielding similar instruments, Alshiera could not become a creator.

Still, I don't really want to rely on that oddball... Seraph Hunters were lost to the world a thousand years ago, but there was one person who still knew how to create them. There were two of them a year ago, but one had recently perished.

Alshiera stifled a sigh and returned the Seraph Hunters to the holsters at her thighs before Zagan arrived.

“Good day to you, my Silver-Eyed King. Is it time for a meal?”

As she shamelessly called him by that name, Zagan... didn't grimace as he always did.

“No, I want to ask you something.”

She could tell that something was wrong based on his ghastly expression. Alshiera was ashamed of her own failure. She usually broke bats off her body to get a grasp of the situation around her, but she had no idea what was going on because she had fallen asleep like a log. He should have known full well that she couldn't answer any questions regarding Azazel, but...

“...Has something happened?” Alshiera cautiously asked.

“Alshiera, is it true that you're well-informed about baths?” Zagan replied with the majesty of an Archdemon.

She understood the words coming from his mouth, but she still needed a few seconds to process them.

“Baths...? Do you mean, like, tubs of water?”

“Mhm. Exactly.”

“Uhhh, um... I have fairly standard knowledge of the subject, I suppose?”

Archdemon Zagan smiled in relief. Doing so in front of his bride was one thing, but this was the very first time he had shown Alshiera such an expression.

“Then come with me. Your knowledge is a necessity.”

“Um, could you explain all this in a more simple manner?”

“I'm saying that we're going to make a grand bath here in my castle!” Zagan proclaimed as he gave her a perturbed look, perhaps having expected her to understand from the very start.

“Uhhh...”

It had been about a thousand years since Alshiera felt so exhausted.

“If you live, you’ll surely...” She suddenly recalled her dream. She didn’t hear what came after those words, but...

“Is something the matter?” Alshiera asked upon noticing Zagan’s shocked gaze.

“No, it’s just that this is the first time I’ve seen you smile wholeheartedly.”

And now it was Alshiera’s turn to be shocked. She tried touching her own face, and just as he’d said, her lips and cheeks were stretched into a smile.

“Yes, that’s right... If you live, you’ll surely...”

She felt like she could finally hear the words that had escaped her the past thousand years.

“What are you mumbling about?”

“Teehee, it’s nothing.”

Having said that, she wondered why Archdemon Zagan had suddenly made such a declaration.

However, the answer to the question on her mind eluded her, as it had all started that very morning...

Chapter I: Father and Mother Are Both Angry, so We Tried Making a Hot Spring

“I’m quite angry, Archdemon Zagan.”

Zagan’s throne room. The one standing before him and speaking in a trembling, angry voice was his sworn friend and Nephys’s mother, Archdemon Orias.

One and a half months ago, hostilities between Zagan and Archdemon Shere Khan began during Alshire Imera. And, one month ago, Orias and Bifrons were entrenched on each side of the confrontation during the incident in Raziel’s treasury. The conflict had grown in scale and now involved four Archdemons. They had managed to best Bifrons, but they still hadn’t figured out a way to track the location of Shere Khan himself.

If only we’d managed to capture Shere Khan’s subordinates back then... The two girls who had accompanied Raphael were apparently Shere Khan’s subordinates. Zagan had tried tracing their mana, since they’d come into direct contact with Raphael and all, but as one would expect from an Archdemon, all traces had been completely eliminated. It was impossible to find them.

During that time, Orias had been staying in Zagan’s castle to reconcile with Nephys. However, she was now seething. She had white hair, pointy ears, and azure eyes. These were all proof that she was a superior specimen among elves, a high elf. She’d been wearing the Anointed Armor of an Angelic Knight while assuming the form of a teenager when they had met one month ago, but currently, she had donned pure white robes and taken on the form of a sorcerer.

She’d apparently had some change in mental state, as she wasn’t wearing the hood that normally hung low over her eyes. However, that just made the severe wrath that was coming from her azure eyes all the more prominent. Any normal person probably would have lost consciousness already. Or rather, it felt like she could stop a person’s heart with her withering glare. And yet, Zagan sat atop his throne and crossed his legs as if brushing off a refreshing breeze.

“I have no idea what you mean, Archdemon Orias,” Zagan replied in a light tone, as if telling a joke, yet his words were filled with intense mana that was powerful enough to even crush an Archdemon’s

wrath. An invisible tempest of mana ran amok between them, and enormous cracks tore across the ground from Zagan's throne down to where Orias was standing. It was a reproduction of what had once happened when the two of them met as enemies in the hidden elven village.

They were the only ones in the throne room. It was a sort of secret meeting between Archdemons, but the tension in the air was much more like an already-lit powder keg. Nevertheless, the terrifying thing wasn't the two Archdemons, but the powerful barrier which prevented even a fragment of the abnormal amount of mana raging around the room from leaking out. It was so powerful that they didn't even disturb the ever-cautious member of the Night Clan who was sound asleep several dozen meters below them. If the Archdemons were to suddenly begin a fight to the death, nobody would hear so much as a chirping bird.

"You sure have grown conceited. Did you truly think you could deceive me?"

A severe wind blew through the whirling tempest and slammed into the back of Zagan's throne. But even so, he remained composed and replied in a confident manner.

"I don't know what you're talking about. Listen, I may pay you respect as Nephy's mother, but that does not necessarily hold true for you as an Archdemon."

This time, the stone tiles at Orias' feet were smashed to bits. Thinking back on it, this was likely inevitable. At the very core of their beings, Sorcerers were individuals who only thought in terms of personal loss and gain. And, as kings among sorcerers, Archdemons were basically walking calamities who stole everything they desired and obliterated all who opposed their will.

This was the only possible outcome when two Archdemons resided under the same roof. Honestly, it was a miracle that they'd managed to live in harmony for 31 whole days. The confrontation between them had already escalated to the point where it could only be settled with one of their deaths.

"You swore an oath that I was allowed to act according to my will under the condition that I do your subordinates no harm."

"I did, without a doubt. That is the damned contract that binds us."

"...And I'm saying that was a falsehood," Orias claimed as she grit her teeth. Then, she continued, "I've finally reconciled with my daughter, yet I haven't been able to hold a proper conversation with her this past month. The only time we talk is when I instruct her in celestial mysticism. What exactly is the meaning of this?"

This time, the back of Zagan's throne went flying off, and his eyes

shot open with anger.

“Don’t mock me. Even I want to spend some quality time with Nephy like most couples do, but I haven’t gotten the chance to go on a date with her since we returned from Raziel.”

Mana surged like a tsunami and opened an enormous hole around Orias.

“You’re already living with my daughter, isn’t that enough? I can’t stay here forever,” Orias shouted as she thrust her finger at Zagan. After a brief pause, she exclaimed, “Yield her to me.”

“I refuse.”

The two Archdemons were in the middle of a struggle over Nephy. Though, their menacing gazes made it appear as though they were about to destroy the world.

“You can talk with Nephy any time you want. Why not cook meals with her in the kitchen? It would be a good excuse,” Zagan boldly told an Archdemon to cook his meals, which left Orias at a sudden loss for words.

“I’m busy...”

“What, have you never cooked before? Don’t worry. Everyone struggles in the beginning.”

The princess of the succubi, Lilith, had made that exact claim, but now she was a capable chef. There were people like Chastille and Barbatos who lacked a sense of taste, but with teachers at the ready, it was just a matter of practice. However, Orias sorrowfully held down the sides of her robes.

“That’s true... However, your subordinates are to blame here.”

“...Meaning?” Zagan asked as he cocked his head, not understanding her point.

“It’s difficult to explain, but let’s see... Raphael, was it? That butler came to me to learn swordsmanship, and I was forced to accept as even my daughter wanted me to aid him.”

Raphael was a former Archangel. The Sacred Sword Metatron was still in his possession, and he was eager to learn how to unleash its true power using Confession.

“Oh... Well, sorry about that... Is it taking that much time?”

“...No, he has a terrifying talent for the blade. I don’t really need to teach him much. He’ll reach great heights through self-study. I simply motivated him.”

“Huh? Then how is he keeping you busy?”

“Well, all that talk of swordplay reminded me of the past, so I have him keep me company for some light training.”

“Hmm. Now that’s interesting. How’s your record against him?”

“In about 200 bouts, I suffered three defeats,” Orias replied with a grimace.

It seemed Raphael was on the losing side. Although, considering Orias' age, that result was inevitable.

"Isn't that good?"

"Not at all. Those three defeats were all in the last few days. That man will become stronger than me shortly."

Zagan was startled by that answer. He thought humans could only wither with age without sorcery, but that didn't seem to apply to Angelic Knights. Not only was he not wasting away, but he was also devoting himself even further to the point where an Archdemon was feeling flustered.

Or perhaps it's art that does not wither... Zagan had no idea how to treat martial arts. And because of that, he lost his temper just from having that fact thrust before him. Frankly, Raphael looked dazzling to him for being able to perform such feats.

Zagan shook off his idle thoughts. It seemed Orias was rather compatible with her fellow senior citizen. She was quite fond of Raphael. There was likely no other Angelic Knight in the church's history who'd been so highly rated by an Archdemon. However, that was exactly why Zagan furrowed his brows.

"You seem to be enjoying yourself, so why are you criticizing me?"

"I said I would permit it. However, what on earth is going on with your other subordinates? For example, that sorcerer named Shax."

"Huh? Did he do something again?"

Shax's inability to read the mood was something that frustrated even Zagan. He couldn't deny the possibility that the man had managed to offend Orias.

"He claims he wants to learn more about healing using celestial mysticism and sits in on my lessons with my daughter."

"Aaah... That's... Sorry. I'll talk to him."

"Also, your other subordinates come for explanations and opinions on grimoires and the like. And with so many of them, I ended up addressing them all at once. Before I knew it, it became a mass gathering of sorcerers within the castle."

Zagan was somewhat puzzled by her explanation.

"Oh, now that I think of it, you said you wanted to borrow a large room. Did you use it to teach my subordinates sorcery?"

"Well, that's just how it turned out."

"Isn't it obvious that they'd rush to listen to a personal lecture from an Archdemon?"

And even putting that aside, it was common knowledge that she was Nephy's mother. Given the circumstances, it was perfectly natural that their curiosity had won out over their wariness.

"They seem to be quite fond of you, and you don't look all that

dissatisfied, yourself,” Zagan said in astonishment.

“...That’s why I’m troubled. I can’t find time to spend with my daughter.”

“Can’t you just refuse them?”

“.....” Orias was once more at a loss for words.

Oh, I see. It’s like that, huh? Like how Shax never drives away the kids despite his grumbings... It would have been fine to just leave them alone, but upon seeing an injured waif, that awkward man would treat them or give them bread and such. That was how he ended up being swarmed by children whenever he was in town. And, unable to drive them away, he always ended up looking after them. Zagan wasn’t really one to speak ill of others, but he didn’t think he was as bad as Orias or Shax in that regard. Things would likely have been different if Kuroka stepped in, but the likelihood of that was fairly low. She seemed to be quite fond of Shax, including that facet of him.

I think it’d be fine for Kuroka to throw away her sword and live like a normal woman... She’d finally regained her sight and had been released from the shackles of her past. She likely knew more about “normal life” than Zagan did, so it was about time for her to choose a path that led to her own happiness. Though, to be fair, it was clear that Kuroka would choose to fight. After all, Shax was walking down the path of a sorcerer.

No, I guess we could also just have Shax retire as well... After thinking things through, Zagan realized the conversation was going way off course.

Actually, why are you even coming to me with your complaints? This is a real pain... Still, he could at least understand that she wanted to rely on Zagan because she found herself unable to refuse them herself. And so, after thinking it over a bit, Zagan arrived at an answer.

“How about selecting specific days to hold classes? I doubt anybody would complain if it’s just once a week.”

“Hmm... You have a point.”

“Actually, if you’re that busy, can’t you just force someone like Gremory to assist you? She’s your disciple, right?”

That granny was always making a fuss about love power at every opportunity, but she became as meek as a lamb before her teacher. And despite her demeanor, she was an endlessly talented sorcerer.

“She’s been shutting herself in Archdemon Palace and refuses to face me,” Orias said as she grimaced once more.

“...I thought it felt a little quiet around here. What on earth is she doing?”

He felt like that granny could even love a weed, but the most worthwhile couple to tease was clearly Kuroka and Shax. And Kuroka was in the middle of freeloading at Zagan’s castle due to her eye

treatment. Having to cast that chance aside was likely driving Gremory insane.

Not that they can openly stick together with Raphael around...

Honestly, Zagan should have been the one who was ashamed, since he had made zero progress with Nephy despite the quiet environment. *Or maybe that's why she's gone?* Perhaps Gremory was shutting herself in Archdemon Palace because both Zagan and Shax were showing no signs of progress. In other words, they could lure Gremory by breaking the stalemate...

Zagan was well aware that he was slowly losing his composure, so he pulled himself back together with a sigh.

“Haaah... We should both think of a way to take a breather.”

Orias seemed to have calmed down after letting out all her idle complaints, as an apologetic expression graced her face.

“You’re right. It seems I also lost my composure.”

“It’s fine, really. Don’t worry about it.”

Thinking back on it, Zagan felt like he didn’t show enough consideration for Orias in terms of respecting her position as Nephy’s mother. His fake honeymoon the other day had been fun, so maybe it was worth considering a family trip at some point.

Orias left the throne room behind, and Zagan used sorcery to restore it back to its original state. Immediately following that, someone knocked on the door.

“Hey! What’s up with that lot, Your Highness?!”

A noisy scream resounded throughout his throne room, forcing a sigh from Zagan’s lips. The castle was as peaceful as ever.



“Heya, Lilith. You’re looking, like, real chipper. Did something nice happen?”

They were in Zagan’s castle, in the corridor running from the servants’ bedrooms to the kitchen. Lilith swept back her red hair with a smile at her childhood friend’s comment.

“Heehee, can you tell? I was on bath cleaning duty today. Doesn’t it feel great to get in a long bath after making it all pretty?”

Maintaining her beauty was the greatest joy for the princess of the succubi. Fatigue was the natural enemy of beauty, and a bath cleansed away all forms of fatigue and restored the moisture of one’s skin. It was, therefore, the greatest beauty treatment available.

Lilith was not the lord of the castle, and cleaning the bath was done in shifts, so it wasn’t always perfect. The equipment itself wasn’t bad, but depending on whose turn it was, the cleaning wasn’t as thorough, which often left her unsatisfied.

However, it was also true that Zagan was a king who rewarded

the efforts of his subjects. Once, when she'd expressed her desires to him, he'd allowed the person on duty to prepare the bath however they wanted when it was their turn. This allowed Lilith to prepare costly things like bubble baths and milk baths to her heart's content. And since she was also cleaning it, she could pretty it up until it met her standards.

Well, if I could swing it, I'd want my own personal bath... Still, Zagan was an Archdemon, so Lilith understood that asking for more was a lofty request. He'd already answered her needs to such an extent despite her not being a sorcerer. She truly thought his generosity as a king was extraordinary.

In short, Lilith's greatest pleasure in this castle was bathtime. That was one thing she wouldn't yield to anyone else.

"You sure got good at cleaning, huh, Lilith?"

"Hmph. I'll have you know I'm the noble princess of the succubi. This much is nothing."

Lilith had adapted so well to the castle that she no longer harbored doubts about feeling a sense of accomplishment for cleaning a bath properly.

"I prepared a milk bath for today. Water tends to make my hands rough, so I need one at least once a week."

A bubble bath may have been more relaxing, but Lilith was sure that a milk bath was better for her skin, and Selphy nodded repeatedly in agreement.

"Milk baths are, like, super nice, huh? It's so relaxing, and you won't get angry for, like, a whole day after having one. They're the best."

"Hmhmm, why, of course... Huh?"

Lilith thought she had just heard something inexcusable, but Selphy kept talking with a smile, pushing past her feeble worries.

"You've always loved baths, huh?"

"Well, I certainly don't hate them. I'd actually prefer to get in three of them a day, though..."

Back in Liucaon, she would bathe three times a day, for up to three hours total. Nowadays, that had been reduced to an hour at most. It wasn't that she didn't have the spare time, either. She just had to get out quickly because everyone had to take turns. Even so, one hour was quite a long time. She also wanted hot springs, a sauna, and other such conveniences. However, if she started listing everything she wanted, there would be no end to it.

Sorcerers weren't the type to bathe all that often, which made her question their hygiene, but that had given her more time in the bath, so she couldn't really complain.

Also, I'd like for the men's and women's baths to at least be separate...

The bathing times for men and women were predetermined and separated enough so that they would never conflict. From what she'd heard, a few months ago, Zagan and Nephy were the only residents of the castle. That one bath really would have been sufficient for the two of them. It was big enough for two people to get in at once, after all.

Or not... Bathing together is definitely out of the question for them... It was easy to imagine that, even if by some miracle, the two of them got into a bath together, they'd be unable to look each other in the eye.

In any case, the important matter was the milk bath. Lilith was all smiles.

"So, are you off to, like, take a bath after this?" Selphy asked.

"Yes. Probably after the preparations in the kitchen are complete."

"How about we go in together, then?"

"Wh-What? T-T-T-Together...?"



As a noble princess of the succubi, she could reveal her body to others, but the concept of bathing with anyone else didn't exist. The two of them were no longer children. And sure, they were both girls, but it was still a little embarrassing. Well, since the two noble princesses were cleaning baths and washing dishes, that may not have mattered.

Lilith was turning redder by the second, and Selphy's expression clouded over with disappointment.

"Aww, I can't? Didn't we used to, like, get in together all the time?"

"W-We were children, remember?"

Back before Selphy ran away from home, when Lilith was still eight years old, they'd taken baths together with their other childhood friend, Kuroka. "O-Oh, well... if Kuroka joins us, then... I guess it's okay?" Lilith muttered in a far less dissatisfied tone than she was letting on as her cheeks reddened.

Kuroka had gone through indescribable hardships compared to the two of them, but now that her eyes had healed, she was staying at the castle. Fortunately, it seemed her postoperative state was looking good, but she'd still been blind for over a year, so she needed an adjustment period. They'd also used an unstable power called mysticism to heal her, which meant she needed to be kept under close observation. And as such, Lilith wanted to help her relax as much as she could.

"Really? Yaaay! I'll give Kuroka a call later," Selphy said as she happily threw both hands into the air.

"...Geez. Just this once, okay?" Lilith mumbled as she calmed her beating heart. It was rather embarrassing to enter the bath together, but she didn't hate the idea. She'd been troubled by the fact that a portion of her didn't grow like her two childhood friends, but that still wasn't enough to keep her down. Lilith was in anguish over this unspeakable conflict, but...

"Hmm, are you lot headed to the kitchen?" Raphael asked as he appeared from the other side of the corridor. He was a middle-aged gentleman with a scar that ran down across his brow to his cheek. His left arm was artificial and covered in armor. And, even though he wasn't a sorcerer, he was the castle butler who managed all of Zagan's subordinates.

"Good day to you, head butler... Huh? Eeek?!"

"Hiya! We're about to get ready for... Fwah? Sir Raphael! You look terrible! What happened?!"

It looked like Raphael had been through hell and back. He was covered in blood and dirt. Had he been fighting something? He was

spewing blood from his head, and his clothes were smeared in so much mud that it was hard to tell he was even wearing a tailcoat. Frankly, the sight was enough to turn them both pale.

"Hmph, don't pay it any mind. It has nothing to do with you lot."

Even though he said that, this man was one who acted and spoke in an awkward manner that rivaled Zagan... Or rather, it completely outclassed Zagan. Still, despite all that, he was a kind person at heart who was good at looking after others. Lilith and Selphy were unable to ignore him in his time of need, and, seeing the two of them panic, even Raphael understood that he hadn't said enough.

"I was just training. I'm not injured, so I'll be in the kitchen soon."

"Is that... so?"

"That's fine, then... But why don't you at least take a bath first? You shouldn't enter the kitchen like that."

"You're right. If you'll excuse me, I'll go do just that," Raphael said as he obediently nodded at Lilith's suggestion.

"It's fine. We just need to start making the soup, right?"

"There's still, like, tons of time, so no need to rush."

Lilith and Selphy waved him off, and the butler headed toward the bath. After he walked out of sight, Lilith fell to her knees.

"What's up, Lilith?"

"It's nothing..." Lilith muttered as she wiped the tears from her eyes and smiled.

I wanted to get in the bath first... she thought. However, Lilith wasn't stubborn enough to refuse the butler a bath after seeing the state he was in. Besides, Raphael was rather hygienic compared to the other inhabitants of the castle, so he would keep the bath clean. Above all else, though, he had always taught her about her job to the best of his abilities. He had even praised her cooking recently, so she at least wanted to pay him back for that, if nothing else. And so, Lilith pulled herself together and rose to her feet... to find another familiar face.

"Oh, Mister Shax, nice to see ya."

"Oh my, is Kuroka not with you today?"

It was Zagan's subordinate, Shax. Zagan's bride, Nephy, was the one who'd actually healed Kuroka's eyes, but she and this man were the ones observing Kuroka's postoperative progress.

Actually, Nephy was the one doing the actual examinations. However, it seemed his role was listening to her reports and making judgments based on them. It honestly sounded like quite a tiresome arrangement.

Shax seemed to be out of breath and sweating, perhaps because he'd also been training. It was also curious that the cuffs of his trousers were smeared in mud. He gazed at Lilith with a complicated

expression on his face, looking almost hurt by what she was insinuating.

"I mean, it's not like I'm always by her side. Kurosuke wants time for herself, too, right?"

"Hmm...?" Lilith mumbled as she looked at Shax suspiciously. It was a well-known fact that Kuroka was fixated on this unappealing sorcerer, or that she was clinging to him, basically. The idea that she would want time to herself sounded rather outlandish. Lilith was internally questioning whether to push him for answers, but...

"Oh, come on. You say that, but didn't you, like, get into a big fight with Kuroka or something?" Selphy asked with a giggle.

"Huh? N-N-N-No! That's not—!" Shax broke into a profuse sweat and began stammering incoherently.

"Huh? Seriously...?" Selphy said, clearly at a loss for words.

"Haaah... I bet you did something weird to her. It must be something serious if that girl is angry."

Whatever the case was, they all knew Shax was terrible at reading the mood and dense as a rock. It was actually quite touching that he was putting in the effort to support Kuroka, so it was odd that she was mad at him. Though, it wasn't out of the realm of possibility that Kuroka had simply snapped because of his denseness.

The two girls continued to glare at Shax, and he finally gave in.

"I mean... it's... not a misunderstanding... Sure, I pissed Kurosuke off, but I didn't do anything cruel. I mean, I didn't plan to, at least. Absolutely not."

He was acting extremely suspicious. Still, it was likely true that he hadn't meant to do anything cruel to her.

I do think you should at least quit using that ridiculous nickname... That was merely Lilith's personal opinion, however, so she didn't pry any further.

Perhaps thinking that he'd cleared the air, Shax scratched the back of his head in a carefree manner.

"Well, it's been about a month now, and she's totally not listening to me at all, which is fine, really."

"That doesn't sound fine at all..."

"I guess the bigger problem is that old Raphael found out and I need to run for my life every time I see him. Hahaha..."

Lilith didn't want to consider it, but this war might have been going on for an entire month. It was frightening just to think of it, so she decided to pretend that she hadn't heard anything.

"Oh yeah, is the bath ready?" Shax clapped his hands and asked that question upon remembering it.

"Y-Yes, it's ready, but..."

"Alright, I'll head on over, then. I can get rid of the dirt with

sorcery, but a doctor can't be walking around all sweaty."

"Ah, wait a minu—" Shax walked off before Lilith's cries reached his ears.

"Isn't that, like, really bad...?"

"What?"

"I mean, the head butler is in the bath right now, isn't he?"

"Mhm..." Selphy muttered as she nodded with a blank look on her face, leaving Lilith dizzy.

"Hasn't the head butler been scowling at him a lot lately?"

"Maybe? But it's, like, the bath, right? They should know not to —"

A sudden flash of light and a thunderous roar ran down the corridor.

"Eeep! Why are you in here, Chief?!"

"Have no fear. I shall simply sever your head. I'll grant you my compassion and spare you any pain!"

The bathroom exploded. Shax came running out in terror, followed by the mostly-naked butler armed only with a towel and his Sacred Sword. Raphael's kindness knew no bounds, in complete contrast to his frightening face. However, Shax seemed to have incurred his wrath to the point where he didn't hesitate to draw his sword. And, as Lilith watched that scene unfold in a daze, she sank back down to the floor.

"That bath... I prettied it up... so much..."

The residents of the castle were mostly famed sorcerers. Any of them could instantly restore a bath or two in an instant. It likely wasn't even all that difficult for Nephy, who was an utter novice. However, that didn't change the fact that the milk bath Lilith had done her best to prepare had gone to waste.

"Uhhh... Cheer up, Lilith."

Her childhood friend's words of encouragement were in vain. Lilith needed several minutes to pull herself together. And, after coming to her senses, she marched off in a rage...



"So that's what happened. I request an improvement in the use of the bath!"

After weeping her eyes out... or rather, with tears still in her reddened eyes, Lilith's persistence was beginning to give Zagan a headache. He had put up a barrier so that the sounds from the throne room wouldn't leak out during his conversation with Orias, but that also meant that he couldn't hear anything from the outside either. He never thought that such an uproar would be happening elsewhere in the castle.

What are those two idiots doing...? Raphael was a flawlessly talented man in both combat and cooking. However, when it came to Kuroka and Shax, this was the state he was reduced to. This wasn't even the first time that he had caused such a disturbance. Not that Zagan didn't understand his feelings on the matter.

Zagan had previously asked Shax about the circumstances, but regardless of it being an accident or what his intentions were, Shax was clearly in the wrong. Why was it that he didn't consult Zagan or anyone else about it before the situation blew up like this?

Even Zagan and Nephy, who were present at the time and had mediated between them, couldn't sympathize with him. Having said that, it was true that allowing the situation to continue would be problematic.

Shax was talented and loyal, just like Raphael, making him too good to simply cast aside. But this was a major enough problem that leaving it alone ended up involving someone completely uninvolved like Lilith.

Kuroka was the only one capable of settling everything cleanly, but her mood showed no signs of improvement even after an entire menstrual cycle. She was in the middle of undergoing treatment for her eyes, anyway, so she was in no place to be mediating between others. As such, Lilith's grievances were truly well-founded.

"Well, I understand the situation. I'll have the bath repaired. I'll also warn those two idiots not to go wild in the bath... Let's see... I'll also permit you to add any punishment that you like. Within the realm of reason, that is."

Sorcerers were largely beings who did the unreasonable within their personal realm of reason, but Lilith wasn't a sorcerer. He was sure it would be fine. Maybe. Besides, Lilith was a normal civilian, so it was hard for her to complain about sorcerers. With this, she would be able to vent a little and the others would obediently comply.

"E-Even if you tell me to choose a punishment..."

Having said that, it seemed like Zagan's suggestion was completely unexpected. Lilith hesitated to say anything. This matter was a problem with her personal feelings. Simply having the right to choose a punishment was sure to help alleviate her stress.

Baths, huh...? Zagan, of course, acknowledged that taking a bath was relaxing. He also believed he understood that women considered it very important. However, he didn't really get it. He did enjoy them, but he didn't know how to explain what was wonderful about bathing, and he didn't know why she was so angry when it could be immediately repaired.

I guess it's important enough to her to get angry about it.. He didn't understand her fixation with baths, but he could at least tell that she

get in together comfortably.”

Now it was Zagan’s turn to be bewildered. It was true that the current bath was big enough for two people to bathe at once in comfort, and it would be cramped with a third person. Back when he’d made it, Manuela said it was somewhat larger than those used by the average household. Considering what the bath had originally been, it was a fairly dramatic change. It was true that making it bigger would mean more people could enter at once, but...

“I don’t mind making it bigger, but multiple people bathing at once? Isn’t it more relaxing to go in alone?”

Zagan didn’t fuss over baths, but he did think he felt more at ease when bathing alone.

If someone like Barbatos joined me, I feel like I’d have to drown them. Such a situation sounded like the opposite of relaxing. The current bath was more than large enough. Making it larger despite being more relaxing to use one at a time would also mean more work to get it cleaned up. After having that pointed out to her, Lilith twiddled her fingers.

“I-I also enjoy having a bath on my own... But, sometimes... It’s nice to go in together with everyone else.”

“Is that so?”

“It is!”

Zagan still didn’t get it, but Lilith seemed to be quite fixated on this. The women currently staying at this castle were Nephy, Foll, Lilith, Selphy, and Kuroka. Gremory was technically part of this group, as well as Zagan’s guests Orias and Alshiera. There were also several of Zagan’s subordinates, but they rarely bathed to begin with, so it was probably fine to exclude them.

That made eight people in total. There were also his occasional visitors who came over to play, like Nephteros, Manuela, and Chastille. And though it was very rare for her to come, Zagan’s childhood friend Stella also came over once in a while, putting the count at over ten people. In truth, Lilith was only hoping for something big enough for her, Selphy, and Kuroka to use together. But Zagan interpreted it as meaning all the women in the castle.

If we renovate the current bathroom for that, two or three other rooms would have to go. That would mean adding to the building over the garden or somewhere further out. It really did feel like the scale of such a renovation would be too large just to compensate Lilith for her work-related stress. She was treated favorably as his main liaison with Liucaon, but it would set a bad example to his other subordinates if he allowed her too much. It was worth considering if the others were also making similar requests, but this case would surpass the realm of favorable treatment.

Zagan made a complicated expression as he found himself at a complete impasse, and Lilith drooped her shoulders.

“Umm, I guess it really is unreasonable...?”

“Hmmm... It’s somewhat difficult. It would be a different story if everyone else makes the same demand, though.” Just then, a certain doubt came to mind. “Wait, hang on. Now that I think of it, I’ve heard that Liucaon has a fairly advanced bathing culture. Is that true?”

Back when Zagan visited Liucaon, he’d stayed in the underwater city of Atlastia in the dark depths of the ocean, so he didn’t get the chance to witness this for himself. If their baths were that much more pleasant, then there was cause for renovation.

Lilith put her finger to her red lips and thought it over.

“Even if you ask me... I guess we do? Going by the standards of bathing here, you can maybe say we’re fairly advanced?”

“Hmm. For example?”

“Well, first up really has to be the hot springs. They use gases and heat from beneath the earth to naturally create a hot water bath with all sorts of benefits.”

Meaning there were different types of baths? Zagan suddenly grew curious upon hearing about the categorizations of baths for the first time.

I’ve at least heard of the name itself... The term hot spring was something that he’d heard in passing during his fake honeymoon in the Holy City of Raziel while he was out sightseeing. There were apparently hot springs on the continent too, but he had no idea what they were.

“Is heating the water with sorcery insufficient?”

“That’s no different from a normal bath. Hmm, I guess I don’t know the specific details myself, but when it’s heated up by the earth, there are minerals and such from underground which give the bath some sort of medicinal effect.”

“Huh...? So it’s like soup stock?”

“Please don’t be so blunt about it, Your Highness.”

However, now that she mentioned it, it did make sense. Even in sorcery, the creation of homunculi and chimera required the use of a sort of preservation fluid to prevent them from breaking down. And when they suffered damage or were cursed in a way that required long-term treatment, there were also times where they were stored in a container filled with fluids with healing properties. The preparation of the liquid used in a bath was perhaps something unexpectedly important.

“I see. You’ve piqued my interest. It’s true that such baths... or, hot springs, was it? Indeed, I’ve never seen such a thing in Kianoides.”

Zagan honestly showed his admiration, leaving Lilith in a great

mood.

“Another staple of bathing is the sauna.”

“The sauna...? What’s that?”

Unlike hot springs, Zagan had never heard this term before. Lilith puffed out her flat chest with pride.

“It’s a room which uses coal and steam to raise the temperature.

Umm, it’s about 90 degrees or so?”

“Hey, the races of Liucaon may be fine with that, but most beings on the continent can’t survive in such an environment.”

Zagan’s daughter Foll would probably be fine with it, being a dragon and all, but he would still be worried as a father. Now that he thought of it, there were legends that Liucaon had multiple mountains called volcanoes which discharged molten lava. He thought it was just a tall tale, but they might have lived in such an environment after all. Perhaps it was because they trained every day in such intense environments that masters like Kuroka were born.

Zagan suddenly shuddered at that thought, and Lilith turned red in the face as she yelled at him.

“You’re wrong! What kind of savages do you take us for?!”

“A country of people where a monster like Alshiera casually walks around. I wouldn’t be surprised in the least if the people lived like salamanders.”

“Ugh, that’s...” It seemed Lilith was unable to refute that upon having Alshiera’s name brought up. “That’s not what I mean. Even if it’s 90 degrees, it’s just that one room, and you don’t stay in for long. How do I even put it...? It feels good to let out some sweat after taking a bath, you know? Also, it’s great to cool down your hot body in a cold bath afterward.”

Just thinking of it had Lilith putting her hands to her cheeks in a trance.

“I don’t get it. You’re going out of your way to sweat after taking a bath?”

“Geez, you’ll get it if you give it a try, Your Highness.”

Well, it was true that he didn’t know because he’d never tried it. Seeing that the merits of the sauna were starting to get through to him, Lilith got worked up and continued bringing up more examples.

“Th-There’s a ton of other amazing things, you hear? Like a bath that has bubbles shooting out from below!”

“From below? I know of bubble baths, but is this different?”

“Umm, they’re not bubbles made of soap, but bubbles of air that constantly shoot up. It’s kind of like getting a massage. It feels great.”

“Hmm. I don’t really get it, but it seems like there’s worth in creating a device to shoot out air like that.”

It was entirely possible to use sorcery to do so, and if they also

created the sauna, the steam could be used to create the bubbles too. Neither method was all that complicated.

Lilith put her hands together in joy for a moment, but immediately made a complicated smile. She was happy to have it made, but it was somewhat frustrating to her that the merits of such a bath weren't really getting across. Nevertheless, Lilith remained undaunted.

"Also, there's got to be an open-air bath! Dipping in a hot spring while enjoying nature and the starry sky is just the best. I could spend half a day nonstop like that... It'd leave me unable to move from dizziness though."

"Hang on. Open-air? Doesn't that make it plainly visible from the outside?"

Zagan didn't mind himself, but Nephy also used this castle's bath. There was no way he could permit something so shameless. Did the people of Liucaon not possess the concept of shame? Zagan was left completely taken aback as Lilith turned bright red and denied his claim.

"There's no way they're made so that they can be seen from the outside, right? You put it in a high place, or surround it with a fence."

"Aah, I see. That makes sense."

Zagan nodded in relief, but he really couldn't harbor more interest in the topic. He didn't understand much of what she was saying, but seeing her so zealous about it did tell him how much Lilith valued this. That was surely enough.

"Ugh... The merits aren't getting through at all. Why? Is my vocabulary insufficient? Even though it's a staple for family trips..."

Lilith drooped her shoulders dejectedly. However, there was something she mentioned there that Zagan couldn't let pass.

"...Hey, what the hell did you just say?"

He unintentionally used a stern voice, causing Lilith to jump up on the spot.

"Eek! D-Did I say something strange?!"

"Whatever, just repeat what you said."

"H-Huh? Um, I don't have enough vocabulary? And the merits aren't getting through...?"

"After that."

"A-After that? Uhh, it's... a staple of family trips..."

"That's it!"

"Eek?!"

Zagan reflexively rose to his feet, and Lilith fell to her butt trembling in fear. Ignoring the tears that were pouring out of her eyes, Zagan pointed at her with a snap.

"Allow me to verify. That grand bath or whatnot is something that

a family uses together, correct? Will those who do so be pleased?"

"U-Uh. Mm. They'll be pleased, I think."

Lilith nodded repeatedly, and Zagan was oddly moved by this.

Hmph, it's strange coming from an Archdemon, but this is a divine revelation. Zagan may have ushered Lilith in as his subordinate for this very moment. He flung open his mantle and descended from his throne towards her.

"Well done, Lilith. Henceforth, we shall create a grand bath here in my castle!"

With this, Nephy and Orias would be able to talk at ease, and it would be a good act of paying her respect as a mother. Above all else, this could be accomplished without taking away Zagan's personal time with Nephy. He would also be able to compensate Lilith for her troubles. Everything about it was good. It was to the point where he thought there was something wrong with him for showing no interest in baths before.

"But... baths? Are there any sorcerers well-versed in baths out there?" Zagan asked as he folded his arms.

"Huh? I mean, we don't really need a sorcerer who's..."

"Don't be stupid. I'm a sorcerer. How are we going to create this bath if not with sorcery?"

Nephy's favorite grimoire author was a sorcerer called the Fastidious Cao Lainen. He was the man who'd developed groundbreaking sorcery with regard to cooking and cleaning. He also developed soaps used for bathing, but he didn't dabble in creating the baths themselves.

There was a sorcerer out there who excelled in cooking and cleaning, so there was probably also one who specialized in baths. But Zagan couldn't think of one himself. If there was, in fact, one out there, it stood to reason that they would have left at least one grimoire behind.

Grimoires were still difficult to acquire, though. He was sure he'd be able to find one if he searched hard enough, but that could take years. He couldn't possibly make Nephy and Orias wait that long. As such, he had no choice but to hope that one of his subordinates knew baths, but would it really work out that conveniently?

Zagan groaned over this, and Lilith suddenly muttered something.

"I-I feel like M-My Lady should be pretty familiar with baths..."

"Seriously?! You've really been on point today. Allow me to praise you."

"Y-Yaaay... Uh, is that alright? This is an Archdemon's castle, right?"

Lilith spontaneously celebrated, but she really was deeply bewildered. And so, Zagan went to rouse Alshiera from her nostalgic

dream so that he could create a bath.



“Does it seem somewhat noisy outside?”

A certain guest room in Zagan’s castle.

Two girls were seated across from each other in small chairs. This was the room granted to Kuroka while she was undergoing treatment. Kuroka curiously asked about the noise as her triangular cat ears twitched about, and she cupped her hand over her human ears while furrowing her brow dubiously. She was a cait sith from the island nation of Liucaon. Her small build and glossy black hair gave her a charming beauty that was rare on the continent. She used to wear a native dress from Liucaon, but lately, she had been wearing the same kind of dress as Alshiera. This was apparently under Zagan’s instructions.

Her red eyes, which had previously lost all light, were now looking around the area restlessly. Seeing her like this, Nephy’s expression loosened up considerably. Nephy had pure white hair and almost transparent white skin. She had azure eyes, and her features were practically the complete opposite of Kuroka’s. She was wearing her maid uniform just as always, along with her incongruous collar decorated with a ribbon. Her pointy ears shook in the air as they tried to search for the sounds Kuroka was talking about.

She really does seem to be recovering well. Kuroka’s eyes had been treated using mysticism. It was a great power, but it was also unstable and somewhat unpredictable. Kuroka’s eyesight upon being treated had become better than Nephy’s, but her injury had encroached on the optic nerves in her brain.

There was a need to carefully observe her condition to make sure that side effects didn’t damage her brain’s other functions, like her memories. And with that, a quick month had passed by. Although Nephy’s main purpose was to perform medical examinations, it was only natural for them to open their hearts to each other when meeting so frequently over such a long period.

Nephy bore the sin of letting her own people die, while Kuroka bore the sin of being an assassin. It was possible that they felt a certain sense of affinity towards each other because of that.

Nephy put her finger to her pink lips and cocked her head to the side.

“I can’t hear anything. Does it have something to do with that explosion earlier?”

About half an hour ago, when Nephy had come to Kuroka’s room to perform her medical examination as always, she had heard a terrifying explosion outside, followed by Raphael’s roar and Shax’s

scream. She could tell that this was the same commotion as always just from that.

And though she wondered whether these noises were a continuation of that, Kuroka shook her head.

“Umm, I think it’s something else. They sound like footsteps, like several people running about in a hurry. Having said that, it doesn’t feel like something bad has happened.”

Kuroka’s fluent answer had Nephy sighing in admiration.

“That’s amazing. It’s said that elves are a race with terrific hearing, but I’m completely unable to make out such details.”

Kuroka once more shook her head.

“In your case, Lady Nephy, is it not because you specialize in hearing something else? A normal elf I had met before said that they were sensitive to the sounds of the wind and such, but they didn’t seem to be capable of hearing the voices of spirits.”

Nephy was a rare species of elf called a high elf who was capable of manipulating mysticism and celestial mysticism. She could hear the voices of common spirits—in simpler terms, the voices of nature—and by communicating with them, she was able to bring about miracles which differed in nature from sorcery.

Nephy honestly didn’t have a good opinion of her fellow elves and returned a fairly complex smile.

“It really is embarrassing that I’m unable to do something that a normal elf is capable of.”

“Oh, that’s not true. Isn’t it the opposite?”

“What do you mean?”

Nephy looked back at Kuroka curiously, who began explaining things while giving it some thought herself.

“Umm, my ears are rather sensitive, but they weren’t like this at all before. I became able to hear like this after I lost my sight.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. So isn’t it because the elves of today have lost the power that you possess that their other senses have sharpened to compensate for it?”

That was apparently how the elves had developed a sharp sense of hearing. Nephy was quite happy to receive such encouragement from Kuroka and smiled.

“Thank you very much, Kuroka. I feel a little more at ease now that you’ve said that.”

“It was nothing... You’ve been so good to me, Lady Nephy.”

“You know the Lady is unnecessary, right? You’re Sir Raphael’s daughter. That makes you family around here.”

At the very least, that’s what Nephy believed, and she was sure Zagan thought the same. Foll also felt a lot of affinity with Kuroka and

came to play in her room fairly often.

Kuroka began blushing.

“Uh... Um, you’re kind of like my goal, I really admire you.”

“Huh? Admire? Me?”

What’s there to admire about me, I wonder? Nephy was aware that she was loved by Zagan, Foll, and those around her. However, she was but a beginner in sorcery and her little sister Nephteros completely surpassed her in her studies in celestial mysticism. She didn’t believe that she excelled enough at anything to warrant any sort of admiration. And as she continued to sit there with a blank look, Kuroka began twiddling her fingers.

“I-I mean, you’re lovely, and cute, and your skin is so white, and every single one of your actions is so girly, right?”

“Huh...? G-Girly?”

Nephy began panicking at the completely unexpected explanation. And seeing that, Kuroka let out a helpless sigh.

“That’s exactly what I mean. Geez...”

“I-In that case, you’re also very pretty and girly!”

So Nephy boldly declared, but Kuroka shook her head.

“It’d be nice if that were the case... But apparently I’m not even recognized as a girl...”

The point of Nephy’s ears stiffened up as she immediately understood who Kuroka was referring to.

“Umm, did something happen with Sir Shax again?”

Kuroka’s cheeks turned beet red in an instant. She’d been trying to hide that fact, but curtly nodded.

“...How do I even put it? He saw my used underwear, right? And even though he touched them, he just said things like ‘I don’t have the slightest interest’ or ‘there’s no meaning to this to a sorcerer beyond research material.’ Isn’t that completely out of the question?”

“Aah...”

Nephy covered her face upon hearing such a heartbreaking story.

Sir Shax, that’s going too far even for hiding your embarrassment... If Zagan were to say something like that to her—though she could definitively declare that it was impossible—Nephy would surely be unable to recover from it. If it was him, after losing his composure, he would say something like “I meant to return them.” Or not... It would surely go like this...

“I do feel sorry, but I don’t regret it.”

And after that, he would writhe in agony over why he had to put it like that.

In any case, setting aside Nephy’s imagination, the key problem here was Shax. Well, it was true that he would’ve been killed by Raphael on the spot if he didn’t say something like that, but it really

did warrant a proper explanation afterward. Nephy couldn't take it anymore and suddenly hugged Kuroka.

"Fweh?"

"It's alright. You're a properly charming woman, Kuroka. Even I'm jealous of your squishy skin, beautiful black hair, and the like."

"Lady Nephy..."

Kuroka managed to calm down after a while, and after sniffing up her tears, she let go of Nephy.

"Sorry, I lost my composure."

"Think nothing of it. I can feel what you're going through."

She didn't want to believe that Shax was completely unaware of it himself. Rather, he was likely the one who thought of her the most in a sense.

But he's fundamentally far too dense... Zagan's speech and conduct were truly awkward in that respect, but Nephy did feel that he often looked at her as a woman.

"But I feel just a little more cheerful. I'll try my best to follow your example next time, Lady Nephy."

"Right! That's the spirit." Seeing that Kuroka had cheered up, Nephy rose to her feet. "Now then, that's our examination for the day. Please tell me if you feel anything out of place or have anything on your mind. Even the slightest thing is fine."

"Okay. I'm alright... Oh, but..."

"Is something the matter?"

Shax had said that the time where they thought her postoperative progress seemed to be going well was the most dangerous period. Nephy's body stiffened up, and Kuroka continued, finding it somewhat difficult to put her thoughts into words.

"Um, I've been in your care here for over a month now... Moreover, I feel like my body is weakening from staying in my room all the time..."

It wasn't a problem for her to walk around, but Shax was still worried and had said that she absolutely had to remain in bed.

If you're that worried, please focus on the other things going on with her...

And with no way of knowing Nephy's internal grief, Kuroka cut to the chase.

"I can see now, so I believe I'll be able to do all sorts of things. Is there some work I can help out with?"

"Work?"

"Yes. Having said that, I can't do all that much. But I'll learn anything I haven't done before. So please allow me to do something."

Nephy let out an unintentional sigh.

Even though she's so lovable... It really was up to the individual who

they fell in love with, but it was out of the question not to see Kuroka as a woman like this.

Kuroka was both a patient and a guest here. It ran counter to reason to put her to work, but the one who called this girl family was none other than Nephy. Moreover, Nephy knew full well the pain of receiving favor without having anything demanded of her. Thus, Nephy gripped Kuroka's hand and nodded.

"Understood. I'll ask Master Zagan and Sir Raphael if we're short on hands somewhere."

"Thank you very much, Lady Nephy." After saying that, Kuroka corrected herself in a somewhat embarrassed manner. "I'll be in your care, Nephy."

Nephy was caught off-guard and stood there blankly for a moment, then returned a gentle smile.

"Likewise. Let's do our best, Kuroka."

And just then, someone knocked on the door.

"Please come in."

Kuroka invited her new guest in, and Foll entered.

"Nephy, Kuroka. It's amazing."

"What's going on?" Nephy asked.

"Zagan says he's gonna make a huge bath."

"A bath?"

Nephy and Kuroka exchanged glances. They had no idea why he had decided to do so with such timing. But, seeing that this was Zagan, it surely wouldn't turn out to be something bad. And, without one being prompted by the other, the two girls strained a smile.

Chapter II: Love Power Is the Joy of Discovering Beauty and Admiring It

“Haaah, I just wanna die...”

The one groaning in an endlessly lethargic, androgynous voice was none other than Archdemon Bifrons. They sat atop a throne much like the one in Zagan’s castle... but had their feet up on the back of the seat as they were rolling them about. Even though the sorcerer loved acting eccentric, the sight was entirely unbecoming of an Archdemon.

And speaking of unbecoming, their shirt, robe, and mantle hadn’t been cleaned and were all wrinkled. Their hair was also disheveled. The Archdemon’s former subordinate, Nephteros, would surely have fainted if she could see them now. As for why the Archdemon who’d managed to torment Zagan was reduced to such a state...

“Bifrons... That’s... not... Azazel’s Staff.”

That was what Bifrons’ sworn ally, Shere Khan, had said after they had gone to the trouble of breaking into the Angelic Knights’ treasury, outwitted twelve Archangels and three Archdemons, splendidly seized the mithril staff, and escaped safely.

Zagan had looked flabbergasted by the sight, Orias remained stock-still, and Andrealphus had been unable to do anything despite noticing because he’d had to maintain his neutral stance. Bifrons had believed they had outmaneuvered all those Archdemons, when in fact they were the biggest fool of them all.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The Archdemon ruffled their hair and rolled around. The most painful part of the whole situation was the fact that the dreadful Tiger King averted his gaze awkwardly and tried to comfort Bifrons by saying something like, “I’m also at fault for not properly understanding what it looked like.”

Stop that! Don’t look at me like I’m some pitiful fool!

Sympathy sometimes caused harm to others. And Bifrons usually loved that unsightly facet of humanity, but it really was painful when they were the one put in that position... Actually, this was wholly different from the unsightliness and wretchedness that Bifrons so loved to watch.

Back when the Archdemon failed to recover Nephteros and had a pledge etched into them by Zagan, they’d felt an unsightly sense of bitterness. However, Bifrons had thoroughly enjoyed themselves, since

that was their first time experiencing it. And the sweet taste had intoxicated them precisely because it was the sort of unsightliness Bifrons loved.

Simply remembering that time made them want to see Zagan in despair when next they met, but on the other hand, they were also hoping to see whether they would be the one to taste defeat once more. The only ones who could bargain at the same table as Archdemon Bifrons were the other Archdemons, and Zagan was especially arrogant and ruthless, making him even more wonderful.

The pursuit of sorcery was generally relegated to greater minds, but sorcerers were still ordinary beings at heart. Enjoying life gave it meaning. And the way people squirmed when they were brought down to their knees was extremely filthy, yet also extremely beautiful. Bifrons loved to see people like that, and they weren't against being forced into such a state themselves. People who struggled in anguish were priceless, and the moment such people exceeded Bifrons' expectations was the most moving thing in the world in their eyes.

However, being comforted out of pity was entirely different. Bifrons didn't wish for such humiliation or kindness. An Archdemon was supposed to be far crueler. Shere Khan should have called them incompetent or disappointing and looked at them with scorn while throwing out verbal abuse. When Bifrons first tangled with Zagan, they'd had their head blown off by him. So, why was an Archdemon kindly telling them, "Do not despair, nobody would think it was a broom"?

Bifrons was so bad at handling regular kindness that it even gave them hives. They had a particularly twisted personality and inclination among sorcerers, let alone Archdemons, so the whole situation irked them. They did use sorcery to suppress said hives, though. In any case, Bifrons' heart was basically torn to shreds, but it was completely different from what they wanted.

"...Haaah, I really wanna die."

As such, the Archdemon was rendered utterly lethargic. If Nephteros were here with them, she would surely have ignored their idle complaints and scolded them, but that little doll was stolen by Zagan.

That damn Zagan. Did he anticipate this when he pulled Nephteros out alive?

If so, he was a terrifying schemer. Thinking of how that terrifying Archdemon and Azazel were in the middle of trying to outwit each other sent chills of fear down Bifrons' spine. It made them wish that the feeling would go on forever.

"Haaah... But I guess it really is painful, so that won't do."

Bifrons would no longer be able to preserve their body in the form

of a human if their mental state dragged out forever. The case involving Azazel's Staff was basically Bifrons self-destructing, but this led to Zagan indirectly tormenting them. He really was a detestable man. But that was what made him so fun, which was what was the most frustrating fact of all.

Thus, after spending an entire month in such a languid state...
"Bi...frons..."

A voice called out to him, and it was accompanied by the creaking of a wheelchair. This wheelchair was capable of moving on its own using mana. It was a magic tool that had an Archdemon's crest carved onto it. A tigryn with white fur and a withered body sat within it. He was once the most powerful Archdemon, heralded as the mighty Tiger King. But now he'd been reduced to a mere shadow of his former self. Bifrons returned the very image of a pure smile to the wheezing Archdemon while, of course, still upside-down on the throne.

"Hey there, my dear sworn friend, Shere Khan. Sorry about my appearance."

"Oh, mmm... Are you... alright?"

Shere Khan's considerate gaze wounded Bifrons' still suffering heart. Though, one who sat at the summit of all sorcerers, an Archdemon, was flailing like a spoiled brat in disheveled clothing, so his words were fairly understandable.

Having said that, Bifrons knew nothing fun would happen if they constantly wallowed in their failure. And so, they straightened themselves up, and this time decided to sit on the top of the back of the throne.... Perhaps they had some strange disease where their mind would break from sitting in a chair normally.

"Now then, you coming to see me must mean you've thought up a new plan, right?"

They'd failed in capturing Alshiera, Kuroka, and Azazel's Staff. With such a continuous string of failures, even the Tiger King was left in a deadlock. Shere Khan showed no signs of making any moves for the entire month that Bifrons spent rolling around listlessly.

"I finished... repairing... my subordinates..."

"Oh, that."

As his appearance suggested, Shere Khan was unable to stand up on his own. He had two subordinates to aid him, but they were greatly damaged during the case in the treasury. It seemed Shere Khan had been working away at their repairs over the month that Bifrons hadn't seen him.

"I would've at least repaired your familiars if you'd asked me for assistance... No, I suppose it's best to say I would've at least heard you out, though I wouldn't know what to do," Bifrons said as they shrugged their shoulders.

“...They’re... special...”

“Heeheehee, is that so? It does look like you made them in quite the peculiar fashion.”

Bifrons was the one who’d gotten Dexia and Aristella out of the treasury. And, of course, they’d extracted as much information as they could from the twins without their consent. The girls hadn’t said anything themselves, but both their expressions and bodies held information.

Well, that was the price of asking for my help, so he can’t exactly complain...

Shere Khan had yet to dispel the sorcery cast on Bifrons. And that made perfect sense, since he didn’t know whether Bifrons would betray him on the spot upon having it removed. He couldn’t be careless about it, but Bifrons required collateral to keep the alliance between them going. So, as a result, Bifrons had managed to acquire something far beyond what they had expected.

I may be able to use that to accomplish my goal... That was why the little Archdemon maintained their friendly relationship with Shere Khan and was compelled to keep up the act. Due to all that, it wasn’t exactly clear who held the reins in their alliance. But Bifrons knew it likely wasn’t them. And as an Archdemon, they truly despised the feeling of being controlled. In fact, they even felt the long-forgotten feeling of fear because of it, which made him want to usurp control.

This is so fun!

Unlike Zagan, Bifrons enjoyed bargaining with Shere Khan. Though, perhaps that was only because of their advanced age. Having said that, however, it was also true that he likely knew too much.

Shere Khan simply stared on in silence.

“There’s no need to be so cautious. I’m not so shameless that I’d lay my hands on my ally’s belongings. Hahahaha!”

“.....”

The Tiger King remained silent as if searching for Bifrons’ true intent, but he eventually gave up.

“It would be... difficult to... target Alshiera... or the rare species...”

“I bet it would. Zagan is actually quite shrewd. And it seems old lady Orias is with him now. It will surely end poorly for us if we make even a single wrong move.”

There was also Valefor, who Bifrons evaluated as comparable to an Archdemon. Zagan’s subordinates, Gremory and Kimaris, couldn’t be underestimated. And the two Sacred Sword wielders at hand in Raphael and Azazel. It could be said that Zagan had the strongest forces among all the Archdemons.

If Bifrons made a move now, it would reveal their hiding place, and there was a limit to how many places they could retreat to. It also

required a fair amount of effort to escape with the immobile Shere Khan in tow.

“The fake... Azazel’s Staff... is made... of mithril...”

“Hmm?”

Mithril was like a high-purity crystallization of mana. It was generally used as equipment or weaponry to amplify one’s mana, but it was also sometimes baked into the cores of homunculi and golems.

It’s way too expensive though, so I’m probably the only sorcerer who would actually do it.. Bifrons laughed as if they’d been given a brand-new toy.

“Now, isn’t that interesting? So? The fact that you’re telling me this now means you still don’t have enough, right?”

Both of the present sorcerers were extremely intelligent individuals who had gained the seat of an Archdemon. Once their preparations were complete, the simple phrase, “Do it!” was enough to get them to know what to do next. The fact that Shere Khan went out of his way to mention the mithril meant exactly that.

Bifrons was currently unable to decline Shere Khan’s demands, so he wondered just how unreasonable his ally was going to be. It was a predicament that would have made any normal sorcerer choose suicide without hesitation, but Bifrons’ heart was dancing with glee as if they were waiting to open a present from their best friend.

Before continuing, Shere Khan steadied his breathing. And the request from the Tiger King that required him to calm himself down was...

“I want... one more... Sigil... of the Archdemon...”

Bifrons stood there, completely confused for several moments.

“Do you perhaps mean... a sigil other than ours?”

“That’s... right.”

Shere Khan nodded as if he’d said the most obvious thing in the world, leaving Bifrons completely speechless. There were no Archdemons who would willingly lend the use of their Sigil of the Archdemon, meaning there was no other choice but to steal one. In short, the Tiger King was telling Bifrons to arbitrarily kill another Archdemon.

Bifrons’ reaction to such a nightmarish request was...

“Pffft! Hahahahahahahahaha!”

...laughter. They burst into such raucous laughter that they even had tears in their eyes.

“Hahahahaaa... You want one more? Is that really something you should ask for like a toy? Hahahahaha— Ow!”

Bifrons fell off the back of the throne from laughing too hard.

“Heh, heh, haaah... That was a good laugh. Now that’s the Tiger King for you. Your humor is on an entirely different level.”

“I’m... being serious...”

Bifrons heard that, then took a seat on the throne’s armrest.

“Oh yeah, there’s one Archdemon out there who we don’t need, huh?”

It wasn’t like all the Archdemons were as ambitious and active as Zagan. Some secluded themselves within their castles and refused to get involved with the world.

Like old lady Orias, for example... Well, those who secluded themselves like her also tended to hide some ridiculous power, so prodding at them carelessly was a foolish task. But that, in itself, was a splendid form of amusement to Bifrons.

The thirteen Archdemons were like unpredictable jack-in-the-boxes. They were creatures who Bifrons, twisted to the core as they were, revered to no end. However, wasn’t there just one Archdemon among them who was endlessly boring?

“Very well, my dear friend. Seeing that this is none other than your personal request, I shall obtain a sigil for you,” Bifrons proclaimed as they nodded in satisfaction.

“You say that... so casually...”

When they heard that, Bifrons smiled like a child hoping for a pretty sticker from their teacher.

“Well, it’s not really my style, but I’ll do it for you. In return, though, maybe you can lend me those familiars of yours?”

Dexia and Aristella were Shere Khan’s special familiars. The two of them were unaware of this, but Bifrons considered the twins to be akin to a box of jewels.

They’re completely useless as they are right now, though... Still, something interesting was sure to happen if just a little spice was added to the mix. Or, perhaps, they would become a powerful poison that brought Bifrons, Shere Khan, and even Zagan to ruin. Either way, Bifrons thought they would be suitable toys. One or two Archdemons was nothing as long as he had those two girls by his side.

“Very... well...” Shere Khan consented without showing any sign of doubting Bifrons’ motives.

“Okay, it’s a deal,” the little Archdemon said as they smiled like an innocent child who’d just gotten a splendid present.



“Alright! Everyone is here!”

Eight people were gathered in Zagan’s throne room: Zagan, Nephry, Foll, the recently captured Alshiera, Lilith, Selphy, Kuroka, and Shax.

Shax and Kuroka still looked somewhat awkward around each other, but that had nothing to do with Zagan’s current needs. And so,

he stood before his throne and went on to address the others with the majesty of an Archdemon.

“The reason I have gathered you all here today is because there is something I need you to do.”

He paused there, took a look around the room and saw Shax hesitantly raise his hand.

“Hey, Boss, can I ask you something first?”

“I’ll allow it. Speak.”

“Why’d you put up such a sturdy barrier around here?”

The throne room was protected by the same barrier that had been present during Zagan’s conversation with Orias. It made it impossible for anyone to enter the room, but it also made sure nobody on the inside could leave without the Archdemon’s permission. It was both an impregnable fortress that kept any invaders at bay and an Archdemon-class prison. The fact that Shax noticed it was proof of his skill as a sorcerer.

“What, you can’t tell? You have a sharp mind, but you really are bad at reading the mood...”

“That’s just how he is, Mister,” Kuroka added with a sigh.

“If you say so...”

It seemed Kuroka’s discontent with Shax had been accumulating, so Zagan simply nodded along to comfort her. She seemed to be criticizing him, but she wouldn’t be going through so much trouble if that was all it took to get Shax to realize what was going on.

“Sorry, I really don’t understand,” Shax said as he shrugged his shoulders and turned pale. Then, he continued with, “Well, I guess we’re not here to be executed, at least, considering who else you summoned...”

“In your case, you should consider the possibility of being strung up, seeing who’s here.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

Shax’s response made all the girls, Nephy included, give him ice-cold glares.

That’s exactly what I’m talking about... Zagan couldn’t criticize others about their lack of common sense, but he honestly felt Shax was in a league of his own. Still, he figured that pestering this man wouldn’t get them anywhere, so he let out a soft sigh and decided to continue his speech.

“I’ll start by answering that question. I can’t have the people outside, especially Orias and Raphael, hear about any of this.”

“You wish to keep it a secret from my mother?” Nephy inquired as she cocked her head to the side with a blank expression on her face.

“That’s right.”

“So the reason you called me here is because this is related to

Lord Raphael?" Kuroka asked. Her triangular ears had quivered and twitched as she mulled over his statement.

"Mmm. It's good that you're quick on the uptake, unlike Shax."

"Haha..." Kuroka chuckled, then smiled bitterly. Zagan had hoped to improve her mood, but it seemed this was a fairly serious case, so he failed.

After a moment of silence, Alshiera timidly raised her hand.

"May I also ask a question?"

"Yes, go ahead. Your cooperation is indispensable this time around."

Zagan was, frankly, quite reluctant to rely on this vampire, but she was a necessity. So, as long as he was relying on her, he would reward her appropriately and pay her due respect. That naturally included thoroughly explaining everything she wanted to know. A king who couldn't do that was worse than a bandit.

"I didn't mishear you when you said this was about making a bath, correct?" Alshiera asked, unable to hide her bewilderment.

It seemed rumors had already spread, seeing that Nephy, Kuroka, and Shax didn't look surprised in the least.

Well, it's not a problem as long as it doesn't get out that this is about showing respect to our parents... Zagan was fine with minor rumors, so he nodded as he proudly puffed out his chest.

"You heard right. I declared that we would make a grand bath here in my castle."

Alshiera put her hand to her head as if she was suppressing a headache. Though, it was more akin to phantom pain, since the undead didn't have a pulse to trigger one.



“Taking hold of Azazel’s Staff was quite the feat, so why now?”

“Because it has become a necessity,” Zagan replied without the slightest hesitation.

“Aren’t there other, more important, things at hand?” Alshiera asked in a quizzical tone.

“I don’t know what the hell you’re fighting against, but my enemies are Shere Khan and Bifrons.”

“Well, our goals align on that count.”

They were on the same page at last.

“So, what will you do after killing them?” Zagan asked.

“Huh?” Alshiera uttered, completely dumbfounded. It almost seemed like she hadn’t given it any thought.

“Let me just say this, I don’t plan on sacrificing a single one of my subordinates. I won’t let them die in a fight against those damned Archdemons. And even after I kill Shere Khan and Bifrons, I’ll continue looking after them, since they’ll be contributing to my cause.”

That obviously also applied to Nephy, Foll, and Raphael, who were his family. It may have just been the reasoning of a child who refused to sacrifice any allies to kill his enemies, but Zagan was an Archdemon. He was a king. Regardless of what others thought, he would arrogantly accomplish the impossible. He’d sworn to protect them without even really knowing it.

“My conflict with Shere Khan is beginning to drag out, which means I should show them my gratitude. Isn’t that right, Lilith?”

“Eep?! U-Umm, yes. I-I think...”

This had all begun due to Zagan’s desire. He’d merely wanted Nephy and Orias to spend time together as mother and daughter. However, he also wanted to show his subordinates some gratitude, so he’d decided to kill two birds with one stone.

I don’t know if sorcerers will be pleased with a bath, but it’s fine so long as it’s something that sparks joy.

He’d also assumed Nephy could give it some sort of mana restoration effect. And if that didn’t work out, it was fine if it just ended up being something for Nephy, Lilith, and the other girls to enjoy. Girls apparently loved baths, after all. Though, having said that, he couldn’t make all of his subordinates work for such a personal reason, so he’d only gathered those who were related to the case or had a reason to help him out.

Alshiera stood there blankly for a while, but then laughed as if she’d found the whole situation rather comical.

“Teehee, as always, your words exceed my expectations, my Silver-Eyed King. I had thought you suddenly wanted to take a trip to

some hot springs with Lady Neph.”

“D-D-D-D-D-Don’t be so shameless! W-We can’t possibly go in together!”

“Huh?! A b-bath... together?”

Nephy suddenly jumped in shock.

What? Is Neph also interested? But... Zagan knew they were in a relationship, but that still seemed a little extreme. He’d been trying to kill Shere Khan quickly so he could try out all sorts of things with Neph, but he’d never dreamed of anything like that... Regardless, it felt like something to look forward to.

Both Zagan and Neph were in agony, unable to speak their true desires, leaving Alshiera completely exasperated.

“You two... Hot springs are separated by gender.”

Zagan had unconsciously thought of entering with Neph and was now writhing in agony and covering his face in embarrassment. Neph also covered her face and crouched down.

“Huh? I don’t sense Gremory,” Foll curiously commented.

“I mean, even Gremory can’t do anything about this barrier, right?” Shax responded.

Foll looked truly surprised as she turned her amber eyes to Zagan.

“Zagan, your barrier is amazing.”

“Personally, I think Gremory’s more amazing, since you can’t keep her out without a barrier of this scale...” Shax added listlessly.

“Yaaay!” Selphy exclaimed as she threw both her arms in the air. Then she said, “The bath’s, like, gonna get waaay bigger! Isn’t it great, Lilith?!”

“H-Hmph! I’ll abide by His Highness’ decision.”

Lilith acted like the discussion had troubled her, but her cheeks were dyed a happy red. Next to her, Neph finally pulled herself back together and let out a sigh.

“A bath...?”

“Are you interested in it as well, Neph?” Kuroka asked.

“Well... yes. Bathing does feel good,” Neph replied as she bashfully nodded, her ears quivering ever so slightly. She really did look happy about it.

Mmm... Neph seems happy, so this was clearly the right choice... Zagan thought. He knew he could just make up an excuse if anyone complained, so that development pleased him... However, as Zagan nodded in satisfaction, Shax drooped his shoulders in despair.

“I thought you were the more serious type, Boss.”

“What are you even saying? It’s mostly your fault I’m stuck making a bath right now. Just be glad I’m not cutting your pay.”

“How is it my fault...? Oh, you mean because of the damage from this afternoon? But that was out of my control, and Raphael was the

one who actually destroyed it.”

“Quit your whining. I’m telling you we’re doing this to put Raphael in a good mood, since it’s reaching the point where I won’t care if he kills you sooner or later.”

Shax was on the verge of death a mere few hours ago. He turned pale at the thought, but immediately understood the meaning behind Zagan’s words and was moved to tears.

“Sorry, Boss. I honestly thought you’d abandoned me already...”

Zagan had wanted to give up on him, but he’d quickly realized that he would be in a world of trouble if Shax died.

After that, Kuroka’s ears twitched about as she came to a certain understanding.

“Oh, I get it. That’s why you’re making a bath.”

“What do you mean, Kuroka?” Nephy asked.

“In Liucaon, hot springs are a staple destination for family vacations. They’re used to pay respect to your parents, so I’m sure Lord Raphael and Lady Orias will be pleased.”

Raphael and Kuroka were father and daughter, as well. And so, if Shax contributed to such a show of respect, Raphael’s attitude would surely soften. That was the reason they had gathered.

“I-Is that so? That makes me... a little happy,” Nephy said in bewilderment as her pointy ears quivered. It seemed she’d also been searching for an opportunity to have an open conversation with Orias, so she looked relieved.

Foll got rather excited as she clenched her fist and let out a big breath through her nose.

“Respecting parents...! I’ll also do my best!”

“Right, let’s put in a lot of effort, Foll,” Kuroka said as she held Foll’s hand. Then, Nephy grasped Foll’s other hand, and the three of them threw up their arms.

This kind of scene is pretty heartwarming... Zagan usually only had Nephy and Foll on his mind, but seeing Kuroka next to them gave him a real sense that his family was growing.

“In that case, I’d also like to invite Nephteros. Would that be alright, Master Zagan?”

“Mhm. You’re right. We can just tell Orias it’s for today’s training... We’ll need to head into town to get whatever we’re missing anyway, so we can grab her while we’re there.”

“Good!”

They’d learned of their mission, so all their gazes fell on Zagan once more.

“So, what should we do?” Nephy asked.

“Hmm, let’s see...” Zagan nodded deeply and got lost in thought. After a moment, he turned to Alshiera and asked, “How should we

begin, Alshiera?"

"Are you delegating this entirely to me?" she asked as she opened her golden eyes wide in disbelief.

"Why are you acting all shocked? Didn't I say I needed your advice because I know nothing about baths?"

Zagan sighed, wondering how she'd failed to figure that much out. Alshiera, in turn, sank into silence while pondering if she'd missed something quite obvious over her 1000 year long life.

"Anyway, don't think too hard about it. Just tell us what you'd like to use. We'll do the actual work."

"Haaah... Am I going to be using this bath as well?"

"Huh...? Well, of course you are. Or what, are you going to tell me that those of the Night Clan don't take baths?"

Zagan wasn't so dim that he would tell the person he asked for advice they couldn't use it. And yet, Alshiera stiffened up as if she'd just heard something unexpected.

"Is something wrong...? Look, I won't force you to use it if you don't want to."

"No, that's not..." Alshiera trailed off and shook her head as if to shake away her confusion. But eventually, she donned her usual expression and said, "Anyway, a grand bath, was it? Personally, I'd like to have a hot spring built, but do we even have space for one?"

"Hmm... There's nothing right behind the castle, so that would probably work."

"Then first, you have to start with a geological survey. Also, you have to do something about the scenery. An open-air bath is meaningless if you can't enjoy the view."

"Oh! Nephteros and I should be able to do something about the vegetation!" Nephy exclaimed.

"I can also handle some simple pruning. I helped out back at my old home," Kuroka added.

Zagan nodded at the two reliable girls and flipped open his mantle.

"Then let us begin by investigating the land we plan to use. Everyone, make sure not to speak a word of this to the others."

Shortly after that, everyone followed Zagan out of the throne room in little groups. And as they walked out together, Foll turned her face and brought her mouth closer to Alshiera's ear.

"Good for you, Alshiera."

"That's not really... But, yes... I suppose this is a joyous occasion." The vampire sounded anxious, and yet, also happy.



"I think we need to start by doing something or other about the

appearance.”

That was the first thing Alshiera had to say upon coming out to the back of the castle. A dense forest spread out before them, and seeing that there was no path to the main road this way, Nephys and the others didn't tend to this area. They did at least clear away the fallen leaves, so the scenery was neither pretty nor ugly.

“What's wrong with it?” Zagan asked with a nod.

“I mean, this is nothing more than a forest. There are many tall trees, so we can't enjoy the autumn leaves, and the light doesn't pass through them. Once night comes, this will have nothing going for it except for the creepy atmosphere.”

“Is creepiness a benefit? You people of the Night clan certainly have strange taste.”

“Could you at least tell when I'm being sarcastic?”

“Don't let it bother you. I was also being sarcastic.”

It was only proper etiquette to return sarcasm with sarcasm. That was Zagan's intent, but Alshiera put her hand to her head in exhaustion. Shax's inability to read the mood during her entire stay at the castle might have stressed her out.

This vampire was at least a guest here, so there was perhaps meaning in having the bath made to help relieve her stress as well. That's at least what this magnanimous Archdemon, who didn't think for an instant that he was being manipulated, generously believed, at least.

“Anyway, the view? I never thought of that. Is such a thing necessary for enjoying a normal life? We must learn of this, Nephys.”

“Yes, Master Zagan.”

Alshiera faltered upon having such high hopes pinned on her by Zagan and Nephys.

“I don't think it's all that grandiose a thing though...”

Perhaps unable to let this go on, Lilith and Selphy stepped forth.

“This is a castle and all, so the scenery should be beautiful. I mean, it's probably quite pretty when viewed from above, but the view from below isn't the same.”

“That's true, the view from the terrace is rather beautiful.”

Nephys's room was located at the highest part of the castle in the steeple that could only be reached through the throne room. The moon that Zagan had seen at the time—though the room itself was in a terrible state after having its torture devices blown away by sorcery—was very beautiful. It was true that when he looked up at the sky now, the large trees spread out overhead like a roof, which blocked off the beautiful night sky.

“I suppose we can start by cutting down the trees in the area. We can use the timber as construction materials, and anything unfit for

that we can just dispose of with sorcery.”

“Also! Having a lion figurehead where the water comes out of its mouth is, like, totally standard!”

“From its mouth...? Does that make it better?”

Zagan grimaced with a dubious expression at the thought of Kimaris vomiting in anxiety. The lion’s worries had only been accumulating lately because Gremory had been shutting herself inside Archdemon Palace.

“It doesn’t need to be a lion’s head, specifically,” Lilith answered. “Watching the water flow out is somewhat relaxing. It’s better to have something like that to look at, like a splendid sculpture.”

“Hmm, is that so? I’ll think of something.”

He didn’t know what exactly was relaxing about that, but he nodded seriously anyways.

“A statue and running water are a good start, but having some natural stones around will also add to the elegance,” Kuroka added.

“Stones? Is there any meaning to that?”

“Umm, there’s no meaning so to say, but nature sometimes exceeds the power of humanity, doesn’t it? There’s a subdued elegance to experiencing such things. That’s why I think it’d be nice to have some.”

Zagan couldn’t tell whether this was common knowledge or a peculiarity of Liucaon’s aesthetic senses, but that’s apparently how elegance worked.

“I feel like I get it.” Foll seemed to agree with Kuroka. “I find places like the cave of Archdemon Palace really relaxing. But a tunnel dug out with sorcery is kinda iffy.”

“So it’s important to have some naturally made decorations?”

In which case, just thoughtlessly trying to solve everything with sorcery wouldn’t get them anywhere. Was there anywhere nearby which sold such things? It didn’t seem like they were available in Kianoides. Nephy also cast her gaze to the floor in a troubled manner.

“I can get the vegetation to accommodate to a certain extent, but I wonder if the stones will answer me...”

“Is it difficult to do even with mysticism?”

“Rather than difficult, it’s more that the spirits of the earth and stones are mostly moody. I’m not sure I could convince them...”

Elves were said to be a type of spirit themselves, but conversing with spirits was truly just the domain of high elves. Zagan never even considered that spirits had different personalities.

“Moody...?” he asked with a surprised look. “Are the spirits of vegetation different?”

“Yes. The spirits of vegetation, water, and wind tend to be sociable and jovial. They’ll do most anything I ask of them out of

mischievous curiosity.”

Everyone was completely taken aback by this statement.

Mischievous curiosity? Is that really alright...? One of the Angelic Knights who had once attacked this castle had nearly been killed by touching upon Nephy’s wrath. He had suffered a fierce attack, as if the forest itself had a will, but apparently, from the spirits’ perspective, it was more along the lines of, “We just kinda felt like doing it, teehee.”

“Oh,” Nephy exclaimed as she clapped her hands. “But Nephteros seems to specialize in that area. She’s loved by moody spirits, after all.”

“Aah, I bet it’s something like they can’t stand to keep watching someone so diligent and awkward and need to do something about her.”

“Yes. That’s exactly it.”

Nephy clapped once more as her ears happily quivered about. It seemed even she thought of her little sister in that way. Nephteros did, in fact, prefer the use of celestial mysticism which formed crystals from the ground. That likely had to do something with the compatibility Nephy was talking about. In any case, Nephteros’ power was a necessity now.

Nephy then crouched down and touched the ground.

“But I think I should be able to do something about a water source.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes. If I can come to an agreement with the fire spirits, I should be able to make that ‘hot spring’ thing.”

“Now that’s Nephy for you. Can I entrust you with that task, then?”

“Please leave it to me.”

Nephy elegantly picked up the hem of her dress and curtsied as her pointy ears proudly shook about.

“Is that all regarding the scenery?” Zagan asked as he continued to ruminate about it himself.

“There’ll be no end to it if we keep bringing things up, so that’s probably sufficient for now. I think we can just put together what comes to mind one after the other.”

The vampire was living up to Lilith’s nomination as an advisor for the grand bath. But after Zagan gave her a nod, Alshiera cocked her head curiously.

“In any case, you seem awfully open-minded to the opinions of others, my Silver-Eyed King.”

“Hmph. This is all unknown territory for me. I wouldn’t have gathered anyone if I was just going to ignore their advice. Besides, it’s not all that bad to learn of things you know nothing about, right

Nephy?"

"Yes." Nephy humbly nodded as she bashfully turned red in the cheeks. "Surprises are nice, but thinking of things and trying them out together with you like this is... fun, Master Zagan."

"M-Mm! Exactly! Together!"

Zagan did his best to feign composure and nodded. They were already getting along well enough to go on a (fake) honeymoon. He wouldn't falter just from this.

"Oh come on, Mister Zagan, aren't we here with you this time, too?"

"Shhh, read the mood, Selphy."

"It's nice being in a relationship where you just get each other... Haah."

"Are you okay, Kuroka? Should I make Shax apologize?"

"Hang on, why are you looking at me like that too, little lady?"

"Well, I suppose you're enjoying yourselves..."

"Aaaugh..."

Zagan and Nephy covered their faces and crumbled to the ground upon realizing that everyone was focused on them. But it was true that they were enjoying themselves as they planned all this out. It was somewhat thanks to Shere Khan for not showing any signs of making any moves in the past month, but Zagan wished that such days could go on forever.

I don't suppose Shere Khan and Bifrons can just starve to death somewhere out of sight, can they? The world would surely become peaceful if they did. And after Zagan earnestly nodded to himself, Shax scratched the back of his head and pulled a large piece of paper out of nowhere.

"Uhh, got a second, boss?"

"Go ahead."

"I tried roughly jotting everything down. We can deal with the dressing rooms using the trees we cut down, while the stones and stuff can be handled by Nephteros. What're we gonna do about a decorative sculpture? I think we can keep the cost down if we bring something over from Archdemon Palace."

Zagan thought that Shax had been rather quiet, but it seemed he'd taken on the role of a secretary and had written down everything that was being discussed. Zagan felt like he was looking at a major disappointment.

"You're so talented, so why are you so bad at reading the mood...?"

"Huh? Are you complimenting or scolding me?"

"...Well, when the bath is complete, I'll let it be known that you contributed."

“Archdemon Palace...” Alshiera muttered.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing much. Now that I think of it, Archdemon Palace had one, too. A grand bath, that is.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know if it’s still there, but there was one a thousand years ago. I remember it being quite extravagant at the time.”

“Hmm. This’ll go quicker, then. Everyone who doesn’t know about the real thing can go take a look and inspect it then.”

“I think that only applies to yourself and Lady Nephy, my Silver-Eyed King.”

Everyone nodded at Alshiera’s statement, leaving Zagan completely shocked. And after clicking his tongue in irritation, a sudden doubt came to mind.

“Wait. Why the hell do you know so much about Archdemon Palace?”

He could understand the Seraph Hunters being stored there because of her old friendship with Marchosias. But being able to use the baths would mean they weren’t simple acquaintances. Alshiera averted her gaze as if she had made a slip of the tongue, but eventually gave in.

“I lived at Archdemon Palace... for a short while.”

“Meaning you served under Marchosias?”

“It was the lord before him. Well, Marchosias was there too, though.”

Who exactly was this vampire? Zagan glared at her, but her profile was clearly telling him that she would say nothing.

“Tch. Whatever. Back to the sculpture. Our senses will just end up making it a sorcerer’s bath. I’ll entrust this part to you, Lilith.”

“Oh my. You’ll trust my senses?”

“Of course. You’re the foremost commoner among my subordinates. I expect much of you.”

“Hmhm, leave it to me... Hm? Huh? Commoner?”

Lilith puffed out her meager chest with pride, but then looked somewhat doubtful over why she was being categorized as a commoner. Shax also had a curious look on his face, but once more lowered his gaze to his notes.

“About the water source, I think it’d be best to have Gremory take a look.”

“Is Nephy’s mysticism insufficient?”

“Not that. Once we’ve got it gushing out, there’s a question of water quality, right? The big missy’s more of a specialist than I am in that regard, so it’d be more efficient for her to do it.”

Zagan nodded back at his completely reasonable opinion.

“I see. Then Nephy and I will head to town. The only ones capable of capturing Gremory are myself and Kimaris. We need to go get Nephteros, too.”

It wasn't like he just wanted to go to town alone with Nephy. He did, of course, have such ulterior motives, but that was only about 70 percent of his intent. This number really was showing restraint on Zagan's part.

“Oh.” Nephy suddenly raised her voice as she recalled something.

“What's wrong?”

“Ummm, actually...”

It seemed it was difficult for her to say. Nephy brought her face closer to Zagan's ear and whispered to him.

“Kuroka is looking for a job that she can do. Wouldn't that dress be difficult to move around in?”

It really was like Kuroka to make such a request. Zagan could understand her inability to calm down if she didn't do anything.

“Got it. Kuroka, you come with us.”

He wanted to be alone with Nephy, but seeing that he was going to get Gremory anyway, he couldn't expect to enjoy his time alone with her in any case.

“Ummm, is it really alright for me to come along?”

“Yeah. Either way, there's something I want to consult you about.”

“Consult... me?”

Kuroka's triangular ears twitched about curiously, and Zagan nodded.

I wonder if she'll continue to dedicate herself to battle from now on. There had been occasions where Raphael had hoped that she would put away her swords, now that she could see once more. Zagan shared the same feelings, but Kuroka would surely choose to fight. That's because Shax was endlessly awkward and would choose to stay on the battlefield. Zagan only had one answer for people like that. He didn't know how much of that Kuroka understood, but she nodded back to him even as she had a blank look on her face.

“If that's the case, then I'll come along.”

Zagan then turned to Lilith.

“Lilith, you stay here. Go forward with the blueprint for the bath.”

“B-Blueprint? I don't know how to make a blueprint.”

“Don't worry. I'll leave Shax with you. Drawing up a blueprint and drawing a magic circle isn't all that different.”

Shax's face cramped at having it wholly delegated to him.

“Hey boss, can you not say something so unreasonable?”

“What? You can't do it?”

“I mean, I can...”

"That's why I'm leaving it to you. I'm counting on you here."

"I can't refuse when you put it that way..." Shax grumbled in discontent, but stopped complaining there.

"Selphy, Alshiera, you two help out as well. You know more about baths than I do, right?"

And just then, a certain doubt crossed Alshiera's mind.

"I don't mind, but do you plan on making multiple baths?"

"Multiple...? Are a men's bath and women's bath not enough?"

"It's enough, but there are different types of baths, right? If you're going to go out of your way to make a hot spring, shouldn't you try several of them out?"

He didn't know whether they were appropriate for a grand bath, but just from his discussion with Lilith in the afternoon, he had found out about milk baths, saunas, bubble baths, and baths with bubbles which shot up from below.

"Hmm..." Zagan nodded. "You have a point. But how many of those can we make? There's nothing behind the castle here, but it'll take up a significant amount of space if we make two of everything."

Lilith then raised her hand as if suddenly chancing upon a great idea.

"Oh, in that case, why don't we split up the use of the other baths between men and women depending on the day? That way we'll be fine just making one of each."

"I see, that's a good idea. Let's go with that. So, I don't mind if you prepare a certain number of them, Alshiera."

"Heehee, as long as it pleases you, my Silver-Eyed King."

Foll, the other person who had yet to receive any directions, then looked up at Zagan curiously.

"Zagan, what about me?"

"Oh, I'll be leaving the most important role to you, Foll."

"Most important..."

Foll's eyes sparkled at those words.

"I need you to trick Raphael and Orias so that they don't know what's going on here. Also, deal with Raphael so that Shax doesn't get killed."

"Got it," Foll happily replied.

"Well, I'm in your hands, little lady," Shax said with a bitter smile. "It really won't be funny if I die from this."

Shax was speaking as if the place where he was to die was already determined, and Kuroka's expression clouded over.

I'd like these two to reconcile already... He couldn't just tell Kuroka to give in seeing as this was all Shax's fault, but he hadn't thought that their fight would go on for over a month. It seemed that the two of them were both looking for an occasion to hold a proper conversation

and just couldn't find the opportunity.

"So?" Kuroka shook her head as if casting away such thoughts, then looked Zagan in the eyes. "What did you want to consult me about, Mister?"

"Oh, right. Kuroka, you're essentially an Angelic Knight, right?"

The cait sith possessed a tremendous amount of mana and were a rare species capable of bringing about miracles like mysticism, unstable though it was, but Kuroka did not study sorcery. Her sword skills were categorized as those of an Angelic Knight.

"Umm, I'm not sure you can call members of Azazel that..."

"Mm, that's why I was thinking of granting you power befitting an Angelic Knight."

"Power befitting of an Angelic Knight?"

Kuroka's Moonless Sky was a Holy Treasure of Liucaon which rivaled the Sacred Swords, but the Sacred Swords were not what Angelic Knights were primarily armed with.

"Do you mean...?" Nephys seemed to understand what he was getting at.

Zagan didn't reply and simply smiled back at her. The Sacred Swords were the symbols of the church's power. However, there were hundreds upon thousands of Angelic Knights. It wasn't the Sacred Swords which closed the gap between sorcerers and those who fought against them. And Kuroka didn't even possess this common piece of equipment, yet could fight an Archangel on equal ground. So, how would it turn out if she were to be granted such power after having regained her sight? Even as an Archdemon, this question piqued Zagan's curiosity.



"What's wrong you lot?! Can you not even score a single hit against an injured man?!"

The church headquarters in the Holy City of Raziel. A young Angelic Knight with a bandage wrapped around one of his arms roared at the young men before him in the training grounds. There were three of them facing off against him, and each one was armed with a large wooden sword. The greatest force within the church was the Archangels, and even though they were in the middle of training, they were all clad in their Anointed Armor to practice for real combat.

Stella watched this from the sidelines with a bored look. She had crimson hair and a crimson left eye to match. Her other eye was silver and artificial, but her long bangs were covering it up. She was on the taller side for a woman, but still short compared to the other knights.

Stella wasn't wearing Anointed Armor. Instead, she wore the standard ceremonial dress of a member of the church, though her

collar was undone. She recognized herself as a sorcerer, but her teacher Andrealphus had brought her to the church for some reason as the next inheritor of his Sacred Sword. Because of that, she had to wear such stuffy clothing while watching this boring training every single day. She chose not to wear Anointed Armor simply because it felt sweltering.

After plainly letting out a huge yawn, the little girl seated next to her anxiously looked up at her. It was the little sister she had picked up back in her old haunt in Kianoides, Lisette.

“Don’t you have to practice?”

“You’re such a serious and good girl, Lisette. I’m kinda bad with a sword and all, but still, the guys here aren’t any good as sparring partners.”

She had sent everyone to the hospital on her first day of practice, leading to a good scolding from Andrealphus about holding back. Thus, she’d refrained from joining in ever since. Even the young Angelic Knights had become completely terrified of her and refused to even look her in the eye.

That guy who kinda looks like their trainer might do better, though. His name was Arvo Juutilainen or something along those lines. He was one half of the team who’d gotten Zagan to even use Heaven’s Scale Eastern Sky. His brother had already healed up and returned to the field, so he wasn’t present today.

He had enough potential to one day become as strong as Chastille or Kuroka, but he was unfortunately injured. Not only that, but his dominant arm was also the one wrapped in bandages, so he really couldn’t serve as her training partner. She figured it wouldn’t be terrible to play with him a bit after he recovered.

In any case, her teacher had ordered her to commit herself to training as a candidate for one of the next Archangels, but she basically had nothing more to do than practice swings, so she was endlessly bored. Not only that, the one who forced her to be here had some business to attend to or something and left town. It was simply intolerable.

It’s way more fun to research sorcery back at the castle... However, she’d been told not to act in a way that would expose her as a sorcerer, so she couldn’t even read a grimoire. She honestly thought that this was a total waste of time.

“We’ve got nothing to do anyway, so how ‘bout going out and getting some sweets?”

“Mm!”

And just as they stood up...

“Hey, it’s Ginias.”

“Dammit, Junior... Are his wounds really fine now?”

The young Angelic Knights began murmuring. Looking towards the commotion, Stella spotted an Angelic Knight young enough to be called a boy at the entrance to the training grounds. This was Ginias Galahad II. He was the Archangel who served as the head of all twelve Archangels. He had a Sacred Sword at his hip and was wearing his Anointed Armor. He didn't look like he was ready to be back on his feet at all, like he was simply told to come and showed up.

Oh, it's the kid Zagan bullied... It was somewhat inevitable considering their positions, but this boy had been both betrayed by someone he believed in and thoroughly and utterly crushed. A tough situation for a thirteen-year-old boy, indeed. Arvo also stopped his training and looked at Ginias with a worried gaze.

"Lord Galahad. Are you also here to participate in training?"

"...Training?" Ginias replied in a dazed tone like he didn't even know this was the training grounds. It was like he was here in body, but not in spirit, like he was still in the depths of despair. A month had passed since the incident in the treasury, but it seemed he'd been in this state ever since then. Arvo had no way of comforting him in such a state.

"Hmm..." Stella turned around and picked up one of the wooden swords lying on the ground.

Well, I guess it's up to the big sister to clean up the mess left behind by her little brother. She then suddenly walked towards the distraught boy.

"Lady Diekmeyer...?"

For the time being, Stella was being treated as Andrealphus... well, Michael Diekmeyer's illegitimate child. She was honestly extremely reluctant to call him her father, but it was more convenient this way, so she had to put up with it. Either way, Stella had never had a family name, so she didn't really care.

After walking up to Ginias, she leaned down to match his height and grinned.

"Huh...?"

Ginias looked back up at her with a puzzled expression, showing that he was properly cognizant.

"Hi there. You remember me? Well, we've only met once, so maybe you don't."

"...I do. You are Lord Diekmeyer's daughter, correct? I hear you are to be the next Archangel."

"That's about the gist of it."

Stella wasn't accustomed to such formalities, leaving an itchy feeling crawling up her back.

"Anywho, that's how it is."

With their introductions over, Stella reared back the wooden sword in her right hand.

“Huh...?”

She aimed at his dumbfounded face and ruthlessly brought down her sword. A dull thud rang out in the area.

“...What are you doing?!”

Ginias barely blocked the strike with the hilt of his sword.

“Huh?” Stella replied with a blank look. “You looked down, so I thought I’d give you an excuse to go get some rest.”

The boy interpreted this as a slight against him and ground his molars.

“I-I’m... I’m not that weak!”

He then pushed back her wooden sword and used the momentum to draw his blade. Not a wooden sword, but the Sacred Sword he had at his waist.

“Wh-What do you think you’re doing?! Stop that, Junior!”

“Ahahah, it’s fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Arvo tried to stop Ginias, but Stella held up her hand to stop him and mercilessly kicked the young boy in the face.

“Boys can’t go around making a face like that all the time, okay?”

His head wasn’t protected by Anointed Armor, and Stella had kicked him right there without holding back. Ginias went flying back and tumbled across the ground like a ball. That sight had the young men who were in the middle of training in complete shock.

“You’re kidding... She charged in faster than Ginias while unarmed... and unenhanced?”

Angelic Knights were only able to compete with sorcerers in terms of physical abilities once they donned their Anointed Armor. They apparently referred to the state of not wearing one as unenhanced, but Ginias was, of course, wearing his Anointed Armor. The shock of the other Angelic Knights was perfectly understandable.

Zagan and that Kuroka girl would at least be able to do this much, though... She had never actually sparred with Kuroka... or, more specifically, her memories of that time were hazy. Back then, Kuroka wasn’t wearing anything more than a swimsuit, yet she’d been capable of cutting off Decarabia’s arm. Even Chastille, who’d been fighting in the same conditions, had only been capable of inflicting surface wounds. If that cat girl were to wear Anointed Armor, she would surely be even stronger. Stella evaluated her as surpassing even Michael when it came to swordsmanship.

“What do you even know about me?!” Ginias roared as he rose back to his feet.

“I mean, nothing? You won’t get anywhere by forcing yourself to be all unreasonable when you’re all down like that, okay? Stop forcing yourself and go to sleep.”

“I’m not forcing myself!”

She seemed to have struck a nerve. Ginias threw aside his Sacred Sword and came charging in with his fists. Stella grinned back at him and lightly brushed away his punch with gentle movements.

“Hwah?!”

His posture broke and his fist continued into the ground. A dull thud resounded through the area as the stone pavement caved in.

His form still has a long way to go, but that's a nice punch. Even with training, a thirteen-year-old boy's punch shouldn't have had any effect on the ground. Even without his Sacred Sword, he possessed enough destructive force behind his punch to beat the average sorcerer or monster to death. This was the strength granted to an Angelic Knight by their Anointed Armor. This was what allowed them to fight on even grounds with sorcerers. There was just that large a gap between regular humans and sorcerers.

Ginias' punch didn't rely entirely on his Anointed Armor, either. With the right training, he would be able to become fairly powerful even when unenhanced. Stella appraised him as such and let out a laugh.

“Nope, that's no good. You won't even be able to graze me with that kinda punch, let alone Zagan.”

He had talent, but he was still like raw ore. Such an unpolished stone didn't amount to much as it was.

But... I guess I also need training... Back in the day, Stella was supposed to be the stronger one in a fight. But with five years of memories lost and the distinction between sexes creating a gap as they became adults, she felt like she would be extremely hard-pressed to win in a fistfight against Zagan. There was no fun in a fight where victory was impossible, even if it was just fisticuffs between siblings.

However, that only applied if her opponent had skill on par with Zagan or Marc. There was nobody here who could surpass Stella in terms of martial arts. Having said that, her fist would break if she punched Anointed Armor without using any sorcery.

Ginias charged in once more with his fists, but this time Stella softly grabbed his hand and twisted it like a doorknob. The boy rotated in midair with a look on his face like he had no idea what was going on.

“Urgh!”

His back slammed into the ground, but he immediately jumped back up to his feet.

“Ooh! Keep it up! Keep it up!”

It sounded like she was making fun of him, but this was Stella's own little way of trying to cheer him up.

I can kinda understand why Zagan paid attention to him... He was awkward and straightforward, the complete opposite of Stella and

Zagan, who were twisted at the root ever since they were children. Perhaps “pure” was the correct term to describe him. If she met this boy back when she was his age, she would surely have felt revulsion, or completely forgotten his existence. But in her twenties, she felt admiration towards him. In short, she couldn’t really neglect him, and somehow or other wanted to look after him.

After she punched him back and threw him about a few more times, covering his face with blood and dirt, Ginias came charging in with a ramming attack.

“Whoa?”

“Sis!”

Stella was unable to get out of the way and fell to the ground face up.

Oh. Isn’t it kinda bad to get mounted here? She wouldn’t be able to continue dodging punches forever in this position. She would surely die if she took a punch without using sorcery to protect herself. She put herself on guard, but Ginias remained there clinging to her and didn’t throw any punches.

“I’m not... I’m not forcing myself.”

He seemed to be out of strength after being beaten like a rag. Tears poured from his eyes as he kept repeating himself. Stella remained on the ground and gently brushed his head.

“Feel a li’l better now?”

“Huh...?” Ginias looked up at her in astonishment.

“There’s no need to be so well-behaved just ‘cause you’re a kid.”

Children were quick to throw tantrums and irrationally find fault with everything around them. They were able to maintain themselves by doing so. Flailing and screaming at the anxieties and bitterness that were heavy enough to crush him surely served as a good diversion. Well, it would be a problem for a grown man to be doing so, but Ginias was still a child. It was fine for him to let it all out like that.

And as she smiled at him, Ginias began blushing for some reason.

“Uhhh, um, right...”

After that, having judged that the fighting was over, Lisette came running over and pulled Ginias off by the collar with all her might.

“Huh...?”

“Don’t bully my big sister!”

Lisette spread out her arms and stood in front of Ginias. And for some reason, Ginias completely froze up upon seeing her face.

“What?! Y-You’re...”

“Huh? Wasn’t Junior the one being bullied?”

“He totally got the crap beat out of him...”

“I’m a little jealous...”

“Huh?”

Ginias' bewilderment was drowned out by three more confused voices. Stella felt like something strange was mixed in among the murmuring just now, but decided to ignore it and hopped back up to her feet.

"I'm not being bullied, okay? It was, uhh... training?" she said as she plopped her hand on Lisette's head. No way would that convince her, though, and Lisette continued to glare down Ginias, even though it was a misunderstanding. He eventually returned to his senses and hung his head shyly.

"No, you're someone else... Sorry. This is no way to be treating a lady. I even drew my Sacred Sword..."

"Ahaha, it's fine, it's fine. I'm the one who started it. Come on, can you stand up?"

Stella held out her hand, and Ginias bashfully grasped it while averting his gaze. After finally getting back up to his feet, he looked far more refreshed than he had before. Stella was just being nosy, but it seemed her efforts proved useful.

Ginias picked up his Sacred Sword, then bobbed his head down.

"I must thank you once more. I feel like I've woken up."

"That's good then. Okay, let's get going, Lisette."

She had promised to go get some sweets. And as she was about to take her leave, Ginias called out to her once more.

"W-Wait! How did you get so strong despite being a woman? You're not even wearing Anointed Armor... So how?"

Stella and Lisette exchanged looks.

"Even if you ask me... I was homeless for a long time, so it's just kind of a normal sense for self-defense, I guess? There are actually quite a few kids from there who were relatively good at this, including Zagan."

"I can't do that kinda thing, sis. I did learn a bit from the Archdemon, though."

"That so? Then how 'bout I teach you later?"

"Mm!"

The two girls smiled at each other, leaving Ginias in utter shock.

"Wait a moment! Did you just say Zagan? Are you related to that evil man?"

"Evil? Well, he's not a saint or anything, but we were both just waifs in the city, ya know? He's kinda like a little brother of mine?"

"W-Waifs...? That man...? And you, too?!"

Ginias was left with his mouth gaping wide open.

"We were just brats who stole bread and got the crap beat out of us all the time."

They really had been a rowdy bunch. The adults around them had beaten them up, but seeing that they were just kids, nobody went as

far as taking their lives. That may have been why both Zagan and Stella were soft on children. Stella let out a laugh, and Ginias suddenly came running over to her.

“Please. Teach me to fight. I want to... I want to get strong.”

“Okay,” Stella replied cheerfully.

“Please, somehow... huh?” Ginias was once more completely stupefied.

“You wanna train, right? I don’t mind. I’m not really good with swords, though, so I’m not sure if it’ll do you any good.”

In any case, Stella didn’t have anyone to fight with, so she had a ton of spare time. This boy was able to use Confession just like Andrealphus could, so it was probably fine for Stella to fight him seriously.

“I-I’m in your debt!”

“Oh, but before that.” Stella strained a smile as if she’d had enough of all this. “Can we do it later? We’re going to go get some sweets.”

“...I-I’d like to come along!”

Lisette looked unhappy about this, but Ginias followed along humbly for some reason.

“Ah... Let’s end our training here for today.”

And so, Arvo’s exhausted voice fruitlessly resounded behind them.





“Huh?! I just sensed the budding of brand-new love power!”

Far away in Kianoides. Gremory, dressed in a frilly and fluffy dress with a lace ribbon around her neck, in the form of a young girl, suddenly yelled out with an unusually serious expression. She had a basket packed with cookies hanging from her elbow.

“Ugh. I even sensed two explosive bursts of love power from the castle earlier. What a failure to let them pass me by!”

“Miss Gremory, we’ve got a customer with a child! Please give them a cookie!”

“Welcome to the clothing shop Prycula! Please have a cookie!”

Kuu ran around the shop as she called out to Gremory, who pulled out a cookie from her basket with a friendly smile. The avian clerk, Manuela, watched on with a stunned look on her face, her elbow leaning against the counter all the while.

“Comrade. If you’re that starved for lover power, shouldn’t you get back to the castle already?”

“Keeheehee. There’s no way I can go back while my teacher is there, now can I? I’ll definitely get killed this time.”

Gremory collapsed with tears in her eyes. On that day one month ago, Gremory made full use of her omniscient power to sense Orias’ visit and escape. She had run away so splendidly that even two Archdemons couldn’t perceive her doing so.

It was fine to have escaped cleanly and all, but she never thought that Orias would remain in the castle afterward. Thanks to that, Gremory was stuck spending her nights shut inside Archdemon Palace while shivering in fear, and her days were spent hanging out at this shop in any hope of satisfying her thirst for love power, even if just a little.

“Damn you, damn you, damn you... I never thought you’d stay for a whole month. I guess it’s just flooding with love power, so I understand the urge to stay, but don’t you hate being around people?! Go back to the forest already!”

“Zagan’s castle is also in a forest.”

“Then the only choice is to die! Keeheehee!”

“Well, I don’t really care since I get to dress you up and all.”

“Could you two get back to work already?!” Kuu’s desperate scream resounded throughout the shop, but it didn’t reach the two hopeless adults.

Manuela was in the trade business. In exchange for sheltering Gremory during the day, she had her serving customers while wearing clothes of her choice like a dress-up doll. Manuela was likely the only

one capable of reducing Enchantress Gremory, who could even be called Zagan's right-hand woman, to such a state.

After Gremory finished discharging her resentment towards her teacher, Manuela turned a beaming smile towards her.

"Hmhmm. Comrade. Next, try wearing this! It's a new product for the spring. Oh, please switch to about twenty years old."

Manuela took out a tight leotard that was exposed from the shoulders up, stockings, and a hairband with bunny ears on it.

"Hmm? This outfit certainly does seem to possess love power."

"I knew you'd understand. It was originally ordered from us to be used as a uniform for a casino in Raziel, but I thought it'd definitely sell so I had some made for here, too!"

"How wonderful! I must see young maidens wearing this immediately!"

"...Never."

Kuu immediately erased her presence and assimilated with the scenery of the shop. Her invisibility was at the level where even Kimaris would be astonished if he found her. It may have been that an entirely different talent from sorcery had been budding within her after working in this shop for so long.

In any case, after spending a month here already, Gremory was already used to Manuela's demands. The clerk's ability to change someone else's clothes put even sorcerers to shame. Gremory changed into the form of a beautiful woman and was already in her new clothes.

"Keehee, I'm sure a strong love power would come flowing out if Lady Nephys were to wear these in front of my liege. I can't stop drooling just thinking of it!"



“Heehee, now that’s Comrade Gremory for you! You wear it splendidly! But please make an expression a little more suitable for a maiden. I’m sure Kimaris will praise you plenty today!”

“Keeheehwah?! Where is he?!”

“That’s it! That’s the expression!”

Gremory reflexively covered her chest, and now it was Manuela who was extremely stimulated.

What a terrifying woman. But that’s what makes her my comrade!

Gremory had ended up becoming her toy all of a sudden, but Manuela’s understanding of love power likely even surpassed Zagan’s. Gremory even thought of her as an eternal friend. In any case, her sense of style was outstanding.

“Comrade Manuela. I’d like to order a few of these for personal use.”

“Of course, Comrade Gremory. You want one in Nephy’s size and one in Kuroka’s, right?”

“Yeah, and one for Lady Lilith. According to my senses, that girl would be ashamed to wear this kind of clothing despite dressing like a harlot all the time. I feel like Lady Nephteros would also show me a good reaction in that sense.”

“Shame is the pinnacle of love power after all!”

“Yes! Love power!”

“That’s an obvious no. What the hell are you doing?”

After giving Manuela a high five, the back of Gremory’s head was suddenly grasped and she was lifted into the air.

“Oh my, long time no see, Zagan.”

Gremory was unable to look behind her with her head being crushed and froze up smiling with cold sweat pouring down her brow.

“Hmm? So you’ve brought Nephy and Kuroka with you today!”

Manuela said with a bright smile of her own.

“Yes. Thank you for taking care of Miss Gremory.”

“...Um, please cancel the order for those clothes.”

Nephy seemed perfectly accustomed to this already, whereas Kuroka hid behind her while trembling. Manuela could only nod with a meek expression at her request.

“I see. The will of the person in question is important, huh?”

“I’m glad you under—”

“You’ve already got cat ears and tails, so we should make the best use of that and go with a catgirl instead!”

Kuroka turned pale and hid completely behind Nephy.

“Save me, Nephy.”

“Geez, Manuela. Please stop teasing her.”

“Hahahaha. Sorry, my bad. Zagan let me play with her all I

wanted last time,” Manuela replied. Then she then took a closer look at Kuroka’s face and added, “Hmmm, so you can really see now. Good for you, Kuroka.”

“Oh, umm... Yes. Thank you...”

Kuroka could tell that her words came from the heart, so she shyly nodded back. Gremory wanted to applaud such a touching moment, but she instead addressed the one behind her with a cramped smile.

“Umm, my liege. How did you know I was here?”

“I asked Kimaris and he told me you’d be here during the day.”

“Damn you, Kimaris... You traitooooooooor!”

Gremory began flailing around violently as Zagan heartlessly passed down his orders.

“More importantly, your powers are needed. Come back already.”

“Keehee, that’s impossible so long as my teacher is— Ow!”

Zagan suddenly dropped Gremory and she fell on her butt. She was about to claim that there were demands she couldn’t answer even if they came from her king, but before she could, Zagan had released her for some reason. Looking up at him, he was shrugging his shoulders regrettably.

“I see. Oh well. I’ll try someone else.”

“Huh...? Is that okay?”

“It’s not work to be forced on my subordinates. There’s no point in telling you to do something you refuse to do.”

His anticlimactic statement had her dumbfounded, but even so, Gremory was delighted to be released.

“Keehee, now that’s my liege. I thank you for your generosity.”

“But... Is that really alright with you?”

Gremory’s body jolted at Zagan’s suggestive wording.

“What do you mean...?”

“No, forget it. It’s not my hobby to force an unwilling subordinate.”

She could sense a faint hint of love power from every word he said. Gremory could tell. This king was about to start something that would trigger love power to endlessly gush out, just as she desired. However, she knew that if she yielded here, she would have to face her teacher whether she liked it or not. This king of hers was truly an Archdemon. And, no longer able to resist the devil’s sweet whispers, Gremory screamed.

“Cut that out already! Just tell me what you’re planning to start!”

Zagan looked at her with a compassionate expression like he had thought that she would simply remain quiet.

“It’s nothing major,” he said with a sigh. “I just thought I’d make a grand bath that all my subordinates could use at once.”

Gremory doubted her ears.

“Huh? A bath?”

“Mm. Lilith just recently asked for a bath that everyone could use together, after all.”

Such a plan, with such timing. Gremory immediately knew that this was about paying respects to Orias while providing a means of reconciliation between Shax and Raphael.

A grand bath... that everyone can use together...? Maidens all giggling and chatting as they washed their bodies, soaking in a bath and blushing over love stories, inadvertently walking in on them changing... It was a melting pot of lover power that arose from their defenselessness. Such was a grand bath.

Damn you! Damn you! Damn you! Damn

youuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu! Gremory quietly screamed in despair, then placed her hands on the floor in a completely crestfallen manner.

“Please... allow me... to work at the castle...”

Her spirit was crushed in but a few seconds. Letting an event that was practically made for her pass her by was the same as choosing death. Even if Zagan were to complete this plan without inviting her, she would either die from shock or rise in revolt against him.

Zagan had no choice but to invite her from the very beginning, and she had no choice but to accept. In other words, Gremory lost to fate. That's because she was unable to betray love power.



“Well, setting Gremory aside. Manuela, I want you to choose some new clothes for Kuroka.”

Zagan completely neglected Gremory, who was crouching down on the ground mumbling to herself and turned to Manuela. Incidentally, Kimaris was protecting Archdemon Palace. Even though Shere Khan hadn't made a move for the past month, they couldn't loosen their defenses around Archdemon Palace while in open hostilities with him.

“Hnnngh!” Manuela moaned as her green wings flapped about in the air. “So I can play with Kuroka all I want again?! With pleasure!”

“Geez, Kuroka really is scared, so please cut that out,” Nephy insisted.

It was just a few months ago that Kuroka was made to be a plaything here when Zagan bought her clothes. She even had tears in her eyes as she clung to Nephys's back. Zagan really felt like protecting her when she acted like that.

“Kuroka! Run away!”

Just then, a vulpin girl leaped out.

Huh? Where'd she come from? I didn't sense her at all. Kuu's invisibility in trying to escape from Manuela had even surpassed the

perception of an Archdemon. It felt like this clerk was raising spies or something in Gremory and Kuu. If Kuroka was added to the mix, it was likely that they would be able to steal information even from the castles of Archdemons. Not that Zagan had any intentions of having civilians do such a thing.

“Kuu? Why...?”

“Kuu is used to it. So it’s okay...!”

The young girl trembled while bravely trying to protect Kuroka, and Zagan plopped his hand on her shoulder with a look like he could fully understand her.

“Sorry, but I’ve still got business to attend to after this. Leave it for later.”

“Zagan, you devil!” Manuela protested. With Nephy, Kuu, and even Zagan blocking her, she was unable to treat Kuroka like a toy. She looked dissatisfied, yet pulled out some clothes in an instant nevertheless.

“Kuroka is Sir Raphael’s daughter, right? So, how about this! It’s a butler-styled military uniform from Liucaon.”

Manuela had black clothes in her hand. They somewhat resembled the uniforms from the church, but judging from the trousers which differed from what Chastille wore with her uniform, it was clear that it was meant for men. The sleeves and cuffs were also frilly and long, giving a glimpse of Liucaon’s characteristic designs. When paired with a sword, it truly looked like a military uniform. Manuela really did have good taste.

“Mm.” Zagan nodded. “I see. So it matches Raphael’s clothes. Not bad.”

“Right?!”

“Objection!”

Just as Zagan was about to ask for Kuroka’s opinion, Gremory revived from her corpse-like state and shot up to her feet.

“Lady Kuroka should be wearing cute clothing that makes you want to give her sweets and pet her! I propose this yukata-styled maid clothing from Liucaon!”

Gremory pulled out a kimono with a calm motif paired with a frilly apron. It seemed to be a variation of the yukata the group wore on the uninhabited island near Liucaon. It didn’t have the flashiness of the military uniform, but it would truly spur on the urge to want to protect Kuroka even more if she were to wear it.

Manuela and Gremory stared each other down and began yelling.

“I’m disappointed in you, Comrade Gremory. The only scene that comes to mind with those clothes is one of Kuroka and Shax meeting but being too nervous to say anything and having a fight and once they part he’ll say hey aren’t those kinda cute and Kuroka will blush

and fidget around and oh my god it's the best!"

"How foolish, Comrade Manuela. Those clothes you chose will only lead to a scenario where Raphael will act happy while doing work, but say that he wishes she was wearing something more womanly, and in response, she'll tell him that she wants to wear the same outfit as her father and then they'll end up coming back here together and you're a goddamn genius!"

These two knew naught of restraint and exchanged a firm handshake to reaffirm their friendship. And even as Zagan was left speechless by this, he turned to Kuroka, who looked like her soul had left her body.

"Well, I don't tell you to follow in their example, but I do think it would do you good to be a bit more honest with your desires."

"...Right. I've learned much from this."

Manuela and Gremory then turned to her at the same time, causing her to jump up on the spot.

"Kuroka! Which do you think is better?!" Manuela yelled.

"Eek... Um, I'd like. Uh..."

"Okay! Let's have her try both on!"

"Meooooooooooooooooow!"

Kuroka was pitifully dragged away further into the shop.

"Will Kuroka be alright, I wonder?" Nephy asked with a troubled look.

"Well, I guess? Those two do their jobs properly... in the end."

Nevertheless, the feeling of anxiety was close to what he felt when he first brought Foll here to buy clothes. Kuu stood behind the worried couple and muttered with a meek expression.

"I think the clothes Miss Gremory picked are definitely cuter, but Kuroka will probably pick the chief's clothes..." This girl seemed to have been corrupted by the two love power enthusiasts before anyone knew it.

Zagan then realized that Nephy's expression looked somewhat gloomy.

"What's wrong, Nephy? Are you worried about something?"

"Hwah? Umm... Yes..."

They were close enough now that she wouldn't lose her mind over having her thoughts seen through so easily. The tips of Nephy's ears reddened as she cleared out her throat with a cough.

"Why can you tell so easily? Geez... Umm, Kuroka is finally able to see again, right?"

"Yeah. You did well, Nephy."

"Hauu..."

Even Nephy's face turned red upon being honestly praised.

"Master Zagan, you plan on granting Kuroka power as well,

right?"

"Yeah."

Having said that, Nephy was the one who was going to be making her Anointed Armor.

"I believe that Kuroka also has the choice of living as a normal woman and tossing away her sword." Nephy didn't hesitate to express her mind on the matter.

"You're right. I've given that some thought, too."

He was slightly worried that Shax was the person in question, but his existence was what had given meaning to Kuroka's life beyond fighting. However, Zagan shook his head.

"But Kuroka will surely choose to fight. That's why I'll grant her power."

"That's... true..."

Zagan was capable of two things: providing his subordinates with his protection, and granting them power. If Kuroka was not going to choose to live under his patronage, then he would grant her power. But upon seeing Nephy droop her shoulders, Zagan rethought his stance on this.

"But you may have a point, Nephy."

"Meaning?"

"I feel like she doesn't even know that such a choice exists for her. Allowing it to pass without knowing of the choice is different from choosing herself. Even if the result is the same, it may be better for someone to tell her about it."

Nephy smiled like a blooming flower.

"Yes! I'll talk with her about it later!"

After that, Kuroka returned in exhaustion. Just as Kuu predicted, she was wearing the military uniform that Manuela had selected.

"What do you think? I feel like it's the ultimate getup if I do say so myself!" Manuela exclaimed.

"She'll return to this shop shortly, anyway, so you'll also be able to see the Liucaon maid outfit. It's two for one!" Gremory added.

"Aah, mm. Are you alright with that one, Kuroka?"

Zagan vaguely brushed off the two highly stimulated women and cast his gaze over Kuroka. Her consciousness still seemed somewhat hazy, but she didn't look entirely dissatisfied.

"Then I suppose this'll work. Next is clothing that is suitable for Ne—"

"Master Zagan! Mine can wait for another day!"

They'd been unable to go shopping for clothes during their (fake) honeymoon. Zagan tried to go with the flow and pick out new clothes for her, but she stopped him pretty much just as he expected her to.

"Oh, you have a point. Then let's leave it for next time."

“...Pick properly this time.” Kuu muttered in astonishment, but Zagan didn’t pay her any mind.

“I’ll be waiting with cute clothes! Oh, please bring Nephteros with you next time!”

And so, Zagan’s group left the shop as he sighed over the clerk who was begging for more toys.

“Wha?! Now that I think of it, this may be the last time I get to play! Lady Kuroka! I may be on death’s door! So please wear the maid’s clothes too!”

“Can it, let’s get going.”

And, dragging his noisy attendant along, Zagan headed towards the church.



Inside an office in Kianoides’ church.

“Anyway, crybaby, ain’t it gonna be bad at this rate?”

Barbatos suddenly started speaking unprompted. Just as always, he had an unhealthy-looking face and a countless number of amulets dangling from his neck. He was wearing his robe and mantle just like any other sorcerer. His outfit wasn’t really suitable to loiter around within the church, but lately he had been spending a fair amount of time outside of the shadows.

“What do you mean by bad?”

Chastille knit her brows. Her scarlet hair was tied up to the side and decorated with a butterfly ornament. She was wearing the uniform of a bishop which gave her a dignified look that contrasted with her usual crybaby behavior. Her Anointed Armor was decorating her office, but this was still the gallant “work mode” Chastille.

Barbatos already dealt with the matter regarding the traitor, so there shouldn’t be any other problems...

As a result, she couldn’t get him to tell her who it was, but ever since then, she hadn’t had any information in the church kept from her or felt like she was being isolated. On the contrary, ever since the incident in the treasury, she felt like there were more Archangels with a positive attitude towards her.

So, was there another major problem out there that even work mode Chastille had overlooked? She was completely perplexed by this as Barbatos muttered in an annoyed tone, his feet still kicked up on the sofa.

“Being the youngest to become an Archangel is your selling point, yeah?”

“I wouldn’t call it a selling point, but that’s true.”

“Right, so the same goes for that brat the other day?”

“Mm. Both myself and Lord Galahad were appointed as

Archangels when we were thirteen years old. We're both the youngest ever to have the honor."

"And that asshole Decarabia's gonna be an Archangel too, yeah?"

"Call her Lady Stella. But yes, that's correct."

To be perfectly honest, Chastille was perplexed by this. Stella was a sorcerer, and in a sense, was the personal disciple of the strongest Archangel and Archdemon, Michael.

Chastille belonged to the Unification Faction, but unifying was meaningless if her faction couldn't serve as a proper deterrent to sorcerers. Nevertheless, she was confused as to whether it was alright for someone capable of influencing the will of the church to be a sorcerer.

It wasn't like she doubted Stella. She simply couldn't yet see the answer to the question of segregation between the church and sorcerers. However, it didn't seem like that was what Barbatos was getting at. She had no clue what the problem he had in mind was.

And without even a hint of timidity...

"If you lose that one selling point, won't you lose your very purpose for existing?"

"Hwuh?" Even work mode Chastille couldn't hold back her shock. "I-It's not like I'm an Angelic Knight just so I could boast about that!"

"So you say, but the world's all about reputation, ain't it? Even that prick Raphael left the Unification Faction to you 'cause of your reputation. Ain't it bad if others start overlapping with what makes you stand out?"

It was, in fact, true that both Chastille and Stella had scarlet hair and eyes, and perhaps shared the same ethnicity. The two of them looked fairly different, but putting one next to the other was enough to at least provoke some confusion.

"Lord Raphael didn't pick me because of my reputation," Chastille replied with an undaunted will. "I believe he entrusted me with the Unification Faction because he believed in my ideals."

"I mean, you're talking about a guy who inadvertently killed 499 people, ya know? I don't think he gave it that much thought."

"U-Ugh..." Chastille groaned, unable to refute that. "What's so fun about making fun of me?"

"Huh? I ain't making fun of you or nothing. I'm just wo— I mean, I'm just thinking 'bout the future."

"About the future...? Uh, what future?"

Chastille tried imagining her future and was a little shaken at the thought of not being there herself.

"I'm telling you that ain't what I'm getting at, dammit!"

"Huh? I mean, huh...? I'm in the wrong?"

She was unable to hide her bewilderment at the fact that Barbatos

had turned red in the face as he yelled. Well, the man in question surely knew he was being unreasonable. And as he scratched his head in frustration, he began rephrasing himself.

“Aah, in short... You shouldn’t hole yourself up in here all the time. Shouldn’t you get out and do something else?”

Chastille had no idea how he ended up on this topic from the previous conversation, but talking on parallel lines was par for the course with this man.

“What’s that?” Chastille replied with a smile. “Were you being considerate? Sorry, Barbatos.”

“I’m telling you that ain’t it...”

Kuroka, who had been helping Chastille with her office work all this time, was currently hospitalized. This led Chastille’s office work to fall behind schedule. Nephteros was helping out, but she was also absent half the time to further her training in celestial mysticism.

So, with both of them absent at the same time, Chastille had been left pretty much locked up in her office for the last month.

“I’m grateful for your consideration,” Chastille said apologetically. “But we’re short on hands right now. I think I’ll have a little more room for leisure once Kuroka gets back.”

“Don’t the church’s internal affairs seem kinda crude considering they’ve been around for a thousand years?”

He was really striking a nerve.

“Our chain of command can indeed be rather disorganized,” she replied with a groan. “Apparently, the seat of the pope has been vacant for the past few years.”

“Huh? The pope? That’s the biggest bigwig in the church, yeah? So, the top seat’s empty?”

“Yes. It hasn’t been publicly announced, but it seems he died. He was still alive when I was appointed as an Archangel, though.”

According to the information she’d received from her comrades in the Unification Faction, this was a little-known fact even among the Archangels.

“Is it really okay to be blabbing all that to me?”

Even Chastille was astonished by his question.

“I won’t keep anything secret from you. You’ll find out immediately, anyway. It’s faster just to tell you to begin with.”

“Hrgh?! W-Well, I guess you have a point...”

“Huh...?”

Barbatos squatted down with his hand clasping his heart for some reason. It didn’t look like he was disturbed in the least by the pope’s death, so what was this about? He then rose back to his feet while feigning composure.

“So, why’s it a secret? The masses are gonna figure it out sooner

or later, right?"

"His Holiness the Pope is the symbol of the church. There would be great unrest if his death was announced. They're likely keeping quiet about it until a successor has been decided."

"Ain't that kinda fishy?" Barbatos asked thoughtfully as he put his hand to his chin.

"Is it?"

"If that's true, don't it mean the head honchos of the Archdemons and the church died in the last few years?"

"....."

That wasn't all. Head Archangel Ginias Galahad had lost his life last year. That meant all the leaders of every organization had to change. Chastille also found this suspicious and returned a nod.

"I'll try looking into it more."

"That's probably a good idea... W-Wait! That's not what I'm getting at!" Barbatos began yelling again for some reason. "I'm telling you you're clammed up in this room too damn much!"

"That's because we're short on hands..."

Chastille knit her brows, and Barbatos suddenly smacked his own chest.

"So you said already, but lucky for you, you've got me here."

"Huh...? Well, I'm grateful that you're always protecting me."

"Aaaaah! Dammit! You don't get it!"

"Why are you angry?"

She was now at a complete loss. Barbatos shot to his feet, having run out of patience, and thrust his finger at her.

"With me here, you can go any—"

"—Chastille, I have a letter for you."

"Read the fucking atmosphere!"

"...What?"

Nephteros got yelled at as soon as she opened the door. She was a dark elf with tanned skin, silver hair, and golden eyes. Her ears and face were identical to Nephy's, so the two of them were like twin sisters. She had a satchel filled with grimoires hanging from her waist, showing that she was just on her way out.

"Sir Barbatos, you shouldn't speak that way to a lady."

Richard came in along with Nephteros. Regardless of being under the protection of an Archdemon and Archangel, Nephteros was still one of only three known survivors of the high elves. She was rare among a rare species. People targeting her were basically a dime a dozen, so Richard ended up serving as her guard to put up a minimum show of security.

"Ain't it weirder to look for courtesy from a goddamn sorcerer?" Barbatos replied as he huffed to the side in an annoyed manner.

“...Sir Barbatos.”

“Leave him be. It’s futile to take offense with him.” Nephteros glared at Barbatos, but it was true that she’d ruined the mood. “You’re free to seduce Chastille all you want, but this is work. Leave that for later.”

“I-I-I-I-I’m not seducing her or nothing!”

Richard applauded in admiration upon seeing Barbatos thrown so off his game. At the same time, Chastille finally got a hint of what their earlier conversation was about.

Ooh, I guess he was telling me he’d take me out somewhere for a change of pace. He really did word things in a difficult-to-understand manner.

“...Chastille, are you alright? You’re bright red.”

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

The rational side of her tried to stay composed, but her emotional side was unable to hide her unrest. After somehow or other calming herself down, Chastille turned to face Nephteros once more.

“Sorry for having you come here when you were on your way out. Did something happen?”

The fact that she walked back after getting ready to leave made it clear that some sort of problem had come up. If not, she could have left it to Richard. And if not, considering he was her guard, the Three Knights of the Azure Sky or the like could have managed it.

Nephteros scowled and knit her brows.

“It’s nothing that serious, but an important-looking letter came for you. Here. Michael means it’s from *that* guy, right?”

“Yes. It’s a letter from Lord Diekmeyer,” Richard confirmed.

“From Lord Michael?”

That name put Chastille on guard. Michael Diekmeyer claimed he was neutral, so he wasn’t really her ally. In a sense, she had less of a grasp of what went through his mind than she did of Archdemons like Bifrons or Shere Khan. And seeing her stiffen up from that, Nephteros tried comforting her.

“Well, seeing that it’s an official letter, I don’t think it’s anything weird.”

“That’d be nice...”

“At the very least, there isn’t any sorcery or curse cast on it. I’ve finished checking for those.”

“I’m sure you’re right.”

Nephteros not only possessed the power of a high elf, but she also had a rare talent for sorcery. That was only perfectly natural considering her former position as Bifrons’ personal disciple.

“Th-That’s, well... It’d be troublesome if you died,” Nephteros replied as she blushed.

In any case, she had brought over this letter because it would be better for Chastille to have a look for herself if this letter was written by him as an Archdemon. Chastille opened the letter, then nodded after confirming its contents.

“It says he’ll be stopping by shortly.”

“Huh? That’s it?”

“Mm. I don’t think it’s for something trivial, considering he went out of the way to send this notification over... For now, I’ll cancel all my other duties on the day he’s planning to visit.”

“Right, it’ll likely be about something confidential.”

“I shall take care of your duties. Should I send a reply to Lord Diekmeyer that you’ll meet with him?” Richard asked.

“That’d be great. I’m counting on you, Richard. You have my thanks too, Nephteros.”

“I just dropped by while I was on my way out. I didn’t really do anything.”

Nephteros brushed back her silver hair bashfully, which loosened up Chastille’s expression. She then suddenly remembered something.

“Now that I think of it, Nephteros. Have your dreams been alright lately?”

“My dreams...?”

It was something that had happened back when Nephteros ran away from Bifrons and came to Kianoides. She’d been groaning in her sleep and seeing nightmares practically every evening while Chastille quietly stayed by her side and held her hand. Lately, there had been no signs of Nephteros groaning in her sleep, and her complexion had improved. She thought over it curiously for a moment, then suddenly recalled what Chastille was referring to.

“Oh, those dreams? Yes. I haven’t seen them lately.”

“Thank goodness. That’s a relief.”

The fact that she couldn’t recall them immediately likely meant it really was alright.

“What’s this about?” Barbatos asked with a suspicious look.

“It has nothing to do with you,” Nephteros replied as she huffed to the side.

“Haah... You even understand the position you’re in? Just so you know, Bifrons ain’t dead, and we got no guarantee Shere Khan isn’t targeting you as a rare species.”

“.....”

It wasn’t that she didn’t realize this. It was more like she didn’t want to think about it. Seeing her stiffen up, Richard read the room.

“Should I excuse myself?”

“...It’s fine. It’s nothing that needs to be kept secret.”

Richard quietly closed the door, and after confirming that,

Nephteros cut to the chase with a bitter look.

“Back when I ended up coming here, I was tormented by nightmares pretty frequently... They were probably the Demon Lord’s dreams.”

“...Hey. You reported that to Zagan, yeah?”

“I didn’t. I mean, they’re just dreams. I don’t know if they’re actually related to the Demon Lord, either.”

“Oh, come on...”

“Besides, I stopped seeing them shortly after... I think it was about the time we were on that uninhabited island?”

Chastille and Barbatos both covered their faces at the mention of that island. Back when they visited the underwater city of Atlastia, they’d all gone to an uninhabited island to take a break and have fun at Zagan’s invitation. Well, Chastille and Barbatos had a fight, then reconciled and such, so a lot had happened. And, as Chastille writhed over her embarrassing memories of the time, Nephteros continued her story.

“Having said that, we were at the bottom of the ocean all the time. I honestly didn’t really get that much sleep. So, I’m not sure when exactly I stopped seeing them.”

The underwater city was truly a beautiful place. But being at the bottom of the ocean was uncomfortable for ordinary people. Chastille’s subordinates often complained about headaches, and she didn’t get much sleep herself.

“Shere Khan hadn’t gotten involved yet back then, and Bifrons shouldn’t have been able to do anything after being beaten by Zagan,” Chastille noted.

“Well... That’s true...”

Even now, she had mixed feelings upon hearing Bifrons’ name. Nephteros looked rather gloomy.

“So, it’s probably got nothing to do with them, but go tell Zagan. It’s the reasonable thing to do,” Barbatos said as he folded his arms deep in thought. Chastille and Nephteros exchanged glances, finding this rather unexpected of him. “Hm? What?”

“You’ve really mellowed out, huh?” Nephteros replied.

“Hah? The hell does that mean?”

Nephteros simply shrugged her shoulders, then glared at Barbatos.

“This guy looks like he wants me to get lost already, so I’ll be going now.”

“Damn straight, go away already.”

“Cut that out, Barbatos.”

After Nephteros left, the sound of panicked footsteps could be heard approaching Chastille’s office.

“Lady Chastille! That ruffian Zagan has come by again! Shall we

turn him away?” a large Angelic Knight reported in a deep voice. This was one of the Three Knights of the Azure Sky, Ryan.

“No, let him through. There’s the matter of this letter, anyway...”

With that, Barbatos hung his head in the corner in a completely crestfallen manner.

Ummm, should I be the one to ask him to take me out for a break?

However, Chastille wasn’t one who was capable of saying that herself, and was in anguish over it in her own little way.

Chapter III: The World Is Apparently Peaceful Because Archdemons and the Church Are Getting Along Too Well

“Yo, Zagan. Haven’t seen you since the treasury, so I guess it’s been about a month?”

Several days later, in Zagan’s throne room. The one laughing shamelessly in front of Zagan was Michael Diekmeyer, also known as Archdemon Andrealphus.

Zagan’s days had lately been occupied with running around to get his grand bath constructed, but the end was in sight. It would have likely taken a regular craftsman several months to construct, but this was an Archdemon’s castle filled with sorcerers. They could do it in just three days.

All that was left was getting the fine details of the interior design together like the decor, water fountain, dressing rooms and such. The barrier to deal with any idiots who tried to peep—not that he expected anyone to do so in the castle of an Archdemon, but there was a need for perfect precautions considering Nephy was going to be using it—had already been prepared. It was set up to activate once the grand bath was completed.

Michael dropped by just around that time. Zagan did at least hear from Chastille that he would possibly visit. He was currently donning Anointed Armor, meaning he was here as an Archangel, but didn’t have a Sacred Sword at his waist. He had already handed it over to Stella.

Zagan glared at him without hiding his anger in the least.

“It seems you made Stella an Archangel. What the hell are you up to?”

“Come on, don’t be so angry. You got me caught up in your mess at the treasury, so this makes us even, okay? I got thoroughly chewed out by the higher-ups and my comrades for being a traitor ‘cause of that crap, you hear?”

“You brought it on yourself. Just be glad I didn’t reveal your identity as an Archdemon.”

“Gah! You’re as charming a jerk as ever, I see.”

However, Zagan had no intention of getting derailed.

“You claimed that you would save Stella. Are you saying you did

so by making her an Angelic Knight?"

After Zagan had defeated the sorcerer known as Decarabia and was reunited with Stella, she had lost her ego. Honestly speaking, he didn't know if he had the means to save her even now.

But if I knew he was going to force a Sacred Sword on her, it would've been better for me to take her in. Becoming an Angelic Knight while still being a sorcerer was like screaming in an enemy camp to try and kill her. Zagan couldn't permit this to happen. And yet Michael smiled flippantly.

"You've got it all wrong. I only gave her the strength to fight and the means of surviving. She'll walk her own path from here. She can choose to be a sorcerer, an Angelic Knight, or both. It's all up to her."

"Plain sophistry."

Zagan immediately cut his argument down, but Michael still kept up his smile.

"You're not wrong there. But I do think I carried things out properly as a sorcerer, don't you?"

Michael certainly didn't lie. Not that Zagan could accept it, of course. He was urged by an impulse to just give Michael a good slugging, but it wasn't like he could get this man to speak the truth by doing so. And enduring that irritating feeling, Zagan snapped his fingers. A chair slid in from the shadow of one of the pillars and stopped behind Michael.

"Explain yourself. I'll listen, for now."

"Haha, you're so refreshingly arrogant."

Michael laughed and plopped down into the chair. He then pulled out a box of tobacco from his breast pocket. He was likely asking if it was alright to have a smoke. Zagan didn't recall ever forbidding it in his castle, so he gave him a nod.

"Now then, where to start? Well, I guess first off is how you three ended up meeting each other, huh?"

"...What? This has something to do with Marc too?"

"Lemme ask you then. You really think it doesn't?"

He couldn't answer. Michael put a cigarette to his mouth, lit the tip, and let out a puff of smoke.

"Well, it all started with the guy you call Marc. He spent a long time looking for you, and I lent him a hand now and then at his request."

"Wait! What do you mean? Marc was searching for me?"

Their conversation suddenly started with the unthinkable, causing Zagan to unintentionally stand up from his throne.

Marc was the one to split his bread with me when I was on the verge of dying from starvation. He'd also given him the name Zagan and taught both him and Stella how to survive in the alleys. Zagan naturally

hadn't thought he was just some regular boy, but he had never considered that Marc had known who he was before they'd even met.

"Who knows? I have no idea why he was looking for you. All he said was that it was to fulfill an old promise."

"A promise...? To whom...?"

There was no way it was Zagan himself. However, Zagan had no living relatives, so who could have been looking for him? He'd been worthless at the time; nothing more than some brat that nobody would even stop to look at. And as he stood there bewildered, Michael puffed out some more smoke and muttered as if talking to himself.

"This might just be my imagination, but if you've got no clue who it is, then I'm betting it's one of your parents or a relative of some kind. Save my son or brother or the like is a pretty common story, right?"

Setting aside any siblings, Zagan lived a life unrelated to the very existence of parents. He had gained a daughter in Foll and met Nephys's mother, Orias. That was when he finally understood the affection between parent and child. He didn't think he had anything like that himself. Zagan vaguely realized that Marc wasn't as young as he appeared, but how long had he actually lived?

I guess I already know. It's likely been a thousand years. The same amount of time as Alshiera... So what name did he go by a thousand years ago? Why couldn't Zagan find out what that name was? He didn't really want to think of it, but there were far too many points lining up here.

"Well, I was just helping out. I didn't get any of the details from him."

"...I suppose you're not lying."

But that in no way meant that Michael hadn't done some investigation of his own. And here he was blatantly dodging the question. Zagan wouldn't be able to get him to talk even by lowering his head. As such, he let out an angry sigh and let Michael continue with his story.

"Back on topic. He and I found you in Kianoides about ten years... no, eleven years ago now. And a little before that, something even I found unexpected ended up happening."

"...The Sacred Sword?"

Michael nodded with a fed-up look.

"Yeah. The Sacred Swords pick their wielders, you see. Zachariel picked me 800 years ago and hadn't shown any signs of looking for a successor even once. But, all of a sudden, it chose some dirty little brat in an alleyway."

"Hey, hang on. So, what? The Sacred Sword had already chosen Stella back then?"

“Mhm. It was a total pain, you hear me? Old man Marchosias blew his lid at the thought of losing one of the Sacred Swords, and then a bunch of the original wielders went and died along with Orobas a year ago, so we ended up losing even more.”

“A year ago...? And Orobas...?”

“Oops, I say too much? That’s got nothing to do with what we’re talking about here.”

Michael shamelessly whistled and averted his gaze. One year ago, Wise Dragon Orobas had lost his life, while Raphael and Marchosias had suffered fatal wounds. Zagan had investigated that incident a fair bit, but any information regarding it was being suppressed in some manner. He couldn’t get a grasp of anything at all.

In short, they’d fought against demons, and the Wise Dragon, half the Archangels, and the Eldest Marchosias had lost their lives. The major powers of the continent were all concentrated in one place, and over half of them had died. The most important question was why the revival of demons happened in the first place, but Zagan couldn’t find anything about that, either.

“Zachariel chose Stella. But that jerk Marc disapproved of having a brat that young inherit the Sacred Sword. And with no other choice, I used every trick I could come up with to keep using it until she was an adult.”

“That’s possible?”

“Call it an Archdemon’s trade secret.”

He had no intention of revealing what that was, of course.

“...Why Stella?” Zagan groaned.

“Who knows? Oh, hang on. There’ve been other Archangels with red hair and eyes. Could be there’s some sort of regularity to the people picked by Sacred Swords.”

He had an irritating way of putting everything, but this was still a hint.

Red hair and eyes... Chastille? Is she also related to this chain of events?

Michael then put out his cigarette in a little box he pulled out of nowhere. He appeared to at least have the manners not to let the ashes fall to the floor.

“Anyway, just dealing with this was a big uproar for me. And that’s when Marc found little ol’ you.”

“That conveniently?”

The person Marc spent years looking for was right next to the person Michael’s Sacred Sword had chosen to be its next successor. It really needed more thought put into it as a story to get people to believe it. Michael shrugged his shoulders as if he was thinking the exact same thing.

“We also thought we were being set up by someone and were super careful about it. But we didn’t find anything like that going on.”

If an Archdemon was being careful, yet found nothing, it was very likely there really wasn’t anything behind it. It still felt unconvincing, but Zagan had no choice but to believe him.

“We argued quite a bit back then. In the end, the prick Marc decided to look after you two.”

It sounded like an awfully easy to understand relationship, but Zagan was growing more doubtful.

“I don’t get it. Marc lived in the gutters alongside us. If what you’re saying is true, he had significant status and power, right? Why would he choose a life of sifting through trash?”

Zagan wasn’t complaining about not being picked up and raised in a nice environment. But that sort of life wasn’t something people simply decided to set foot in. Just eating and sleeping together with Zagan and Stella should have been unbearably agonizing.

Michael’s eyes shot wide open, finding Zagan’s reaction somewhat unexpected. He then slackened his shoulders and smiled.

“Well, that’s ‘cause you were still a brat, I guess.”

“What are you saying?”

Michael gazed at Zagan like he was looking at a troublesome nephew or something.

“Isn’t that obviously ‘cause he wanted you to choose how you live on your own?”

“.....”

The trigger for Zagan becoming a sorcerer was when he’d been kidnapped by a sorcerer called Andras when he was eight years old. Zagan had turned the tables on Andras and stolen his knowledge and assets.

But it’s possible Marc was nearby at the time. It stood to reason that he’d been right there, but had simply decided not to show himself because Zagan had gotten by on his own. That’s because Andras was a sorcerer skilled enough to be given the second name Resentment. There was no way he was so incompetent that he would’ve allowed a child who knew nothing of sorcery to escape. There was a fairly high probability that Marc was the one who’d given Zagan the opening to run away at the time.

“Just in case, let me tell you this now. The reason you’re an Archdemon is ‘cause you became strong enough to be chosen. I was actually in opposition to it ‘cause of my ties with Marc and all.”

“Aren’t you the head Archdemon? How did I end up being chosen if you objected?”

“The others who saw you devour sorcery were all in high spirits. I couldn’t stop them. Also, that guy, Bifrons, was super interested and

pushed really hard for you.”

“...Haaah. That guy?”

So it was Bifrons, of all people. Zagan enjoyed fully wielding the status and power of an Archdemon, but he still had complex feelings about that. In any case, it appeared that Zagan’s choices in life were his own. However, he still shook his head.

“Enough about me, for now. But how do you plan on explaining Stella’s case? If Marc was protecting her, how the hell did she get caught by that idiot Decarabia...?” And the moment he said that, he realized the truth himself. “I see. Five years ago...”

“That’s how it goes.”

Five years ago, Shere Khan had perpetrated the rare species hunt. Kuroka’s hometown had been burned down, and Shere Khan’s subordinate at the time, Shax, had betrayed his master and guided Marc to him. As a result, Marc had lost his life.

Stella had been attacked by Decarabia and cursed by the King’s Silver Eye just around that time. In other words, she’d lost Marc’s protection five years ago.

To take it one step further, that’s also when Chastille’s brother lost his life. Zagan had received a report from Barbatos about the traitor in the Archangels’ midst. He’d been a little curious about his identity and figured out the details right away. Chastille’s brother Sylvester was betrayed by his adjutant and killed in battle against Shere Khan.

As such, the seat of an Archangel became vacant, and Chastille inherited his Sacred Sword the following year. That would mean that Shere Khan was indirectly responsible for Chastille becoming an Archangel.

All the threads had come together once five years ago. And now they were slowly beginning to unravel. It was very likely there was much more Zagan simply hadn’t noticed yet. The reason he didn’t think the incident at the time was in any way related to him may have also been because Marc was protecting him.

“My subordinate who stole the King’s Silver Eye five years ago was actually Shere Khan’s spy,” Michael said with a listless chuckle. “Anyway, in the middle of transporting it, he got devoured by the curse. My ineptitude is what caused it to fall into Stella’s lap.”

That’s why Michael felt obligated to her, considering she was the next wielder of his Sacred Sword. It may have been part of the reason Shere Khan dared to challenge multiple Archdemons at the same time, including Marchosias. It seemed extremely desperate, but was an Archdemon really one to act in such an unsightly manner?

Does that mean he had a means of winning even if he made all the Archdemons... no, the entire world, his enemy? He surely wouldn’t have been so foolish if he had no prospects for victory. It seemed that it

ended in Shere Khan's failure, but that means of doing so was possibly still within grasp. That's why he could calmly pick a fight with both Zagan and Alshiera now.

Zagan plunked back into his throne. There was too much information to process at once. He pinched his brow, and Michael rose to his feet.

"Well, those are the circumstances behind nominating Stella as an Archangel. I dispelled the curse, and she's a proper adult now. There are ways for her to throw it away if she doesn't want it. She'll be the one to make her own decision later."

"...I see."

Zagan had nothing more to say on the matter, and Michael scratched his head as if this was a bit of a let-down.

"I thought you'd press for more answers about Marc."

"Would you answer me if I did?"

"No way, right?"

He really was an irritating man as always, but Zagan wasn't all that angry about it.

There are only one or two places that guy could've lived around here... It was even possible that he lived in both. Zagan did get a clue from Michael's story. He had no choice but to start by chasing it, even if it led to a dead end.

"Anyway, that's all I had to say," Michael stated as he changed tones and took on the air of an Archdemon. "That's more than enough compensation for having you entrust Stella to me, right?"

"...I suppose."

There was nothing left to talk about. Michael turned to leave, then suddenly remembered something as he tapped the sword at his waist.

"Oh yeah. I'll finish off Shere Khan."

His declaration came out of nowhere, leaving Zagan with a scowl.

"...What brought this about?"

"It's just the old man Marchosias left for me. Besides, I've got some karma to settle with him 'cause of Stella and Marc." He then smiled as flippantly as he always did. "Well, that's how it goes. You just take it easy and enjoy your big bath."

With that, Michael left the castle. He was slippery as ever to the very end. After seeing him off, Zagan leaned back into his throne.

"Good thing the grand bath looks like it'll make it in time..."

Michael claimed he would settle things, but was it really going to end that easily. There was certainly going to be a need to have somewhere to rest one's heart. For Zagan, for Nephy, and for all his subordinates.



Zagan found Nephy after leaving the castle and entering the forest. She seemed to be in the middle of practicing celestial mysticism together with Orias. The two of them were standing face to face.

When Michael arrived, Nephy tried to receive him as a guest as if it were the perfectly natural thing to do. However, it was clear that Zagan's conversation with him wasn't going to be pleasant, including their talks about Stella, so he used that as an excuse to have her enjoy some time together with Orias. He also did this because it seemed like it would've been a pain to have Orias and Michael meet here.

Nephy had her eyes closed and was holding up a worn-out old broom. This was Azazel's Staff. The sunlight peeking through the trees looked like blades around her, giving off a solemn atmosphere. If a priest from the church were to witness this, they would surely claim that a miracle was manifesting before them.

Such a crowd would just be a nuisance and would need disposing of, but that's how she looked in Zagan's eyes. He was completely fascinated by her when the lovely girl's ears twitched in the air.

"Master Zagan?"

Was this perhaps the staff's power? Zagan was suppressing his presence so that he wouldn't get in the way of her training, but Nephy noticed he was there and turned towards him. He lightly waved to her, but for some reason, Nephy's pointy ears quivered greatly as if she was completely startled.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to get in the way."

"Nothing of the sort... Um, did something happen with Lord Michael?"

"Uhh... Nothing much. I'm just headed out for a bit."

He tried to act as casual as he could, but Nephy's expression clouded over.

"I don't mind. Go with him," Orias said as she nodded and practically pushed Nephy from behind. Nephy held the broom preciously to her chest and rushed over towards Zagan.

"Um, if it would please you, could I accompany... No, not that. Umm..."

She shook her head and pulled herself together, then looked up at Zagan once more before picking at the hem of her dress and elegantly curtsying.

"Would you like to go on a date?"

And seeing that Nephy was finally suggesting they do something, Zagan nodded deep in thought.

"Hmm, a date, huh...? Hwuh? A d-d-d-d-d-date?!"

It wasn't the first time they would have gone on a date, but it was, in fact, the first time Nephy had invited him on one. Rather, it was

normally Nephy who responded to Zagan's unreasonable requests. This may have been the very first time she'd invited him to do anything at all.

A- A date? Why? I mean, I'm happy she invited me. But why now?

Nephy wasn't one to ignore what he had just said about going out so that she could suggest such a thing. Seeing Zagan's hands tremble from being so shaken, Nephy's ears turned bright red as she smiled.

"Heehee. It was well worth gathering my courage if I managed to surprise you."

"Th-That's... Well, I'm surprised and happy, but why?"

Nephy put her hand to the bewildered Zagan's cheek.

"You don't seem to be aware of it yourself, but you're making an awful face, Master Zagan. So, um... shock therapy, I think it's called? I tried putting it to use."

Zagan was far more shaken by his talks with Michael than he thought he was, and Nephy had seen through that entirely. She then held out her worn-out broom and twirled it around her waist to sit down on it. There were no signs of sorcery at work, yet the broom floated in the air and Nephy's feet came off the ground.

"Mother just taught me how to fly through the skies with this. If you're planning on going out, then shall I give you a ride?"

"A-And that's a date?"

"Yes... Um, am I being too pushy, I wonder?"

Nephy shyly looked up at Zagan.

"No! I think it's great! Yeah!"

Zagan could fly using sorcery, and if need be, he could use teleportation as well. However, how could he possibly be foolish enough to choose such crude and emotionless means of traveling? It was impossible. Rather, anyone who would get in his way now, be they Archdemons or Archangels, would have to be dealt with. And before getting on the broom, Zagan turned to Orias.

"Sorry, Orias. I'll be borrowing Nephy. Do you mind?"

"If my daughter wishes for it, then that's all that matters. There's no need to mind me."

There seemed to be a difference in leniency between fathers and mothers. It would've been nice if Raphael could show the same level of leniency, but Zagan didn't feel like he would be capable of it himself, so he couldn't really criticize the man.

"Thank you very much, Mother," Nephy said with a huge smile.

"M-Mm..."

In an unusual turn, Orias averted her gaze in a troubled manner. She then waved to Nephy in a reserved manner.

"Be careful."

"I will. See you later."

Zagan endured his embarrassment and straddled the broom behind Nephy.

“Uhhh, is this how I seat myself on this thing?”

He once saw an image of a witch riding a broom like this in one of the picture books Foll had, but Nephy was riding it side-saddle. In fact, there were no pictures of two people riding a broom at once. The tips of Nephy’s pointy ears quivered about as she averted her gaze.

“Umm... You might fall off riding like that, so you should hold on to me tightly...”

“T-Tightly?”

It was honestly pretty hard for him to do this with Orias still waving them off, but his beloved bride was the one making the request. Zagan resolved himself and put his arms around her waist.

“M-Mmm. Like this...?”

“H-Huh? Y-Y-Y-Yes... Like that.”

Nephy nodded as her red ears trembled rapidly and her gaze wandered around in the air.

Her body’s so thin and soft... And her hair! Something smells good and it’s all silky! Now that he thought of it, even though he’d had her sit on his lap before, he’d never hugged her like this from behind. His first experience riding in tandem with her was far too stimulating. Nephy was equally embarrassed—he could feel her heart pounding—and she tightly pursed her lips before raising her voice.

“Th-Then, here we go!”

With that, the broom flew high up into the air.



“Hmmm, now this is quite...”

They instantly flew up high enough to look down on the castle. The sight of the trees swaying from the wind was somehow refreshing. Zagan let out a sigh of admiration, and Nephy smiled in high spirits.

“Heehee, I’m happy that you’re pleased with it.”

Zagan broke into a broad smile himself at Nephy’s unusual assertiveness.

“.....”

A moment of silence.

Having Nephy in his arms made Zagan unable to think of what to say, while Nephy seemed to be concentrating on controlling the broom. She remained bright red and didn’t open her mouth at all. The broom flew over the forest and eventually came out over the open fields where the main road was.

They were making good progress, meaning the broom was actually quite fast. Their pace was about the same as a full-speed carriage. The floaty feeling of riding it was quite pleasant, so it didn’t feel like it was moving that fast though.

“Ah.” Nephy suddenly raised her voice.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

“Ummm, where exactly were you going? I just ended up heading towards Kianoides.”

Now that he thought of it, he’d never mentioned his destination.

“Aah, Kianoides is fine. I have some business at the church.”

“The church... Are you meeting Chastille?”

“Well, things will go faster if I ask her about it, but Nephteros or the like will do too.” And upon bringing up his sister-in-law’s name, Zagan cocked his head to the side. “Now that I think of it, I haven’t seen Nephteros yet today.”

“Yes, she mentioned that she had to stay by Chastille’s side because Lord Michael will be visiting the church today. I believe she’ll come here after their meeting is over.”

“So we might have missed each other. Michael just dropped by here and all.”

He had gone to the church first. Well, that Archdemon was fundamentally a no good old man. Zagan was informed by Chastille that he was coming to Kianoides, but without knowing what his business was, she wasn’t sure whether he was going to visit Zagan’s castle. His actions were unpredictable.

“Nephteros is quite devoted, huh?” Zagan said with a strained smile. “It’d be nice if she pointed even a portion of it at that Richard guy.”

“Heehee. Chastille is a nice person, but there’s much about her

which makes you worried. I'm sure Nephteros feels uneasy about leaving her alone."

"I can't refute that."

Chastille was quite talented in work mode, but that girl was essentially an extreme crybaby wreck. And that facet of her sometimes showed up while in work mode, seldom as it was. It made it easy to understand the feeling of wanting to be by her side when she was meeting with an Archdemon, even if it was Michael.

"Oh yeah, Kuroka and the others were headed to town today, weren't they?" Zagan asked.

"Yes. They went to buy a few things for the bath."

Zagan had gone to inspect the bath at Archdemon Palace, but that one was nothing more than a ruin and didn't tell him much. The ones who were going to enjoy the bath the most were the women, so the three girls from Liucaon, the most normal people among the castle's residents, were sent to town to do the shopping. And with Kuroka's name brought up, now it was Nephy who strained a smile.

"Does that mean Sir Shax is with them?"

"Yeah. He said he was going to tail them at a distance, but that's probably meaningless with Kuroka there."

Kuroka's sharpened senses from her time spent being blind hadn't deteriorated at all. It was even hard for Barbatos to tail her unnoticed. And it was surely even harder for Shax, seeing that she was used to his scent. Gremory also happened to be tailing them as well.

"...This morning, Kuroka entrusted her old clothes to me," Nephy muttered in a troubled tone.

"I see."

Some time ago, Zagan had bought Kuroka clothes, and Shax was hiding them for some reason. The new clothes they bought for her the other day were also meant to be replacements for her missing clothes.

Meaning she ended up choosing power... The fact that she'd handed her old clothes to Nephy meant that she had resolved herself to accepting the power Zagan chose to offer her.

"I suppose Kuroka has chosen to fight, then," Nephy said.

"Both father and daughter are quite awkward, after all. Well, that's pretty much how I thought it'd go."

"But... She did say she was entrusting them only until the day that she no longer had to hold a sword."

Zagan was left staring in wonder at that unexpected reply.

"...I see. That's good."

He didn't know what sort of conversation Nephy'd had with Kuroka, but he was sure that Kuroka had had a change of heart.

"Yes, it really is," Nephy replied with a smile.

Zagan felt like he figured it out just from that.

I felt like something about Nephy has changed. I bet that's also thanks to Kuroka. It wasn't like she had masochistic tendencies or anything, but Nephy's sense of self-affirmation was quite weak. It felt like that had been changing little by little ever since she healed Kuroka's eyes. That was likely also the reason she was able to do something so assertive as inviting him on a date. Zagan nodded as he pretended not to notice, even as he felt earnestly moved by this.

"All that's left is for her to somehow or other reconcile with that idiot Shax."

"That's true..."

Silence once more. However, it was different this time. It felt like Nephy was waiting for Zagan.

"Also, uhh..."

"Yes?"

"That nuisance Michael dropped by just now, right?"

"Yes."

Nephy knew that just from the fact that he'd told her she didn't need to treat him like a guest. However, Zagan wasn't quite sure how to express his feelings, and once more sank into silence while trying to find the appropriate words. After worrying about it for a while, he couldn't find any other way but to put it plainly.

"So... I heard a bit about Marc. It seems he was searching for me based on a promise or something with my parents or siblings, or... actually, it's pretty unlikely it was a sibling... but it was a promise with that sort of person."

Zagan was about seven years old at the time. Even if he had a sibling, he didn't believe a child close to that age would have possessed the influence to move a man like Marc into action. If it was a sibling who was a fair bit older than him, then there was no reason for them not to come into contact with Zagan now. In short, it was extremely probable that someone like Zagan's parents had made the request.

"Thanks to that, the identity of who that was is somewhat on my mind... or maybe I don't want to know?" All he was trying to do was put it into words. There wasn't supposed to be anything strange about this, but he felt disappointment in his heart for some reason. "Sorry. I don't really get it myself."

"No, I understand," Nephy replied in a comforting tone while keeping her eyes on the horizon. "Is it possible that it feels like a betrayal to have a promise made with someone else suddenly inserted into the relationship between you and the man you considered to be a brother?"

She splendidly described the vague feeling that Zagan himself was unable to explain, leaving him wide-eyed in wonder.

"Is that so...?"

"That's how it sounded to me." Nephy pulled one hand away from her broom and touched Zagan's arm. "I don't know what sort of person he made that promise with, but it's what introduced the two of you, is it not? Then I'm sure they didn't mean to harm you, Master Zagan."

"Hmm. That's an optimistic lookout. Do you have a basis for saying that?"

He wasn't really criticizing her opinion, but Zagan was unable to think that way himself. That's perhaps why he wanted some advice. Nephy turned around with a regrettable look and smiled.

"Did you not teach me that yourself, Master Zagan? Parents love their children just the same way you and I feel about Foll."

Zagan was left completely shocked, then smiled bitterly.

"Is that so..."

"Yes, it is."

"But it seems children go through a rebellious age." It was fortunate that such a period had yet to come for Foll, but he'd heard that regular parents often racked their brains over children who did. "In other words, you're telling me I'm going through a similar period?"

"Wh-Wha? N-No, I didn't mean to."

"I'm joking," Zagan said with a laugh.

"Geez... You're being mean, Master Zagan," Nephy replied and puffed out her cheeks.

"Sorry. You really spoil me. I'm alright now."

Nephy didn't reply right away, but pulled on his arm as if embracing him.

"...You owe me now. Please spoil me today until I'm fully satisfied."

"How strict."

"Yes."

"Then... Please fly a little slower. We'll reach town right away like this."

Nephy's ears turned bright red right to their tips at his meager request, and she nodded slightly in return.

"Please don't get angry if the sun ends up setting, okay?"

Kianoides was already in sight, but the broom they were riding only moved ever so slightly towards it.

S-Spoil her? Until she's fully satisfied?! He felt like she'd just said something extremely outrageous. Nephy's ears were bright red and trembling as if to say she was only going with the flow and had just noticed what she'd said herself. He could feel her heart beating like a hammer. He couldn't see her face because she was facing forwards,

but he knew she was on the verge of tears.

“Aaaaaaaah! But I love this!”

The two of them screamed internally as the broom leisurely floated in the sky towards Kianoides.



“Haah... I’m done. I’m seriously done.”

“Dexia, abandoning the mission is punishable by death.”

“So you say, but do you even know what we’re supposed to do?”

“Not at all. Did you hear anything?”

“We were together all this time. Do you think I got the opportunity to get an explanation on my own?”

“...Aristella is disappointed.”

“Could you stop making it sound like it’s my fault?”

After being thrown into Kianoides, Shere Khan’s two subordinates were left standing stock still in confusion. Dexia wore a plain breastplate and a short skirt. She was dressed casually with her shoulders and belly exposed, and she had a chainsword hanging from her waist behind her. Aristella wore a frilly dress that looked hard to move in, but she still had two dangerous-looking scimitars on her.

One was endlessly expressive, while the other was entirely expressionless. One had her hair tied to the right with a red ribbon, and the other to the left with a blue ribbon. They were exact opposites in many ways, but their faces were identical.

They were just about in the middle of the shopping district. The church’s steeple could be seen farther down the street. It seemed like they would get separated right away in the flood of people from different races and social statuses if they weren’t holding hands.

Dexia had no idea what was going through Aristella’s mind, so she tightly gripped her expressionless little sister’s hand. It wasn’t actually clear which was the older of the two, but Dexia recognized herself as the older sister. Although it was likely that Aristella also considered herself the older sister.

“I shall bestow upon you two a top-secret mission.”

That’s what the Archdemon with the repulsive smile said to Dexia and Aristella. Shere Khan had ordered the two of them to obey Bifrons, so they weren’t particularly discontent. Nevertheless, it was, in fact, troublesome to be thrown into the city without being told what said top-secret mission actually was. Thus, they had no idea what they were supposed to be doing. And yet, it would be dissatisfying for them to have their mission labeled as a failure.

That guy really is creepy. Dexia was anxious that Bifrons would bring harm to Shere Khan while the two of them were away. And as she grumbled to herself, Aristella thought things over a little before

speaking her mind.

“This is the domain of an Archdemon.”

“Well, yeah.”

“There are several rare species gathered under Archdemon Zagan... Aristella thinks we’re supposed to capture them.”

“...You think the two of us can pick a fight with an Archdemon?”

That would surely be no different from suicide. The two girls were prepared to risk their lives and be cast aside, but they didn’t like the idea of dying meaninglessly. If they were going to be thrown away, then they at least wanted to die in a way that bought their master time.

“Uwah, oh wah...”

Dexia was nearly knocked over by the flood of people when she sank deep into thought.

“There are too many people here. Aristella suggests we thin them out.”

“You can’t. It’d be bad to get the Angelic Knights’ eyes on us when we don’t even know what our mission is.”

“Shocking. Dexia is being reasonable.”

“You’re seriously...” Dexia let out a sigh and pulled something out of her pocket. It was what Bifrons had given her when the two of them were thrown into town.

“I guess this is our only clue.”

“Dexia. These are called coins. They’re in circulation throughout the entire continent. They don’t appear to have any special sorcery cast on them.”

“I know.”

It was a handful of coins. One gold, three silver, and ten copper. It was just enough money to have fun in the city all day, and Aristella had her own share as well. They considered the coins having some sort of magical effect when put together, but they really did seem to be nothing more than normal coins. Dexia held one up to the sunlight, but it didn’t show any signs of change.

“So, why did we get these?” Dexia asked.

“An allowance?”

“And why would an Archdemon give us an allowance? It’d make more sense if they were cursed.”

Just then, Aristella’s stomach grumbled. Tasty smells were wafting over from every direction, befitting of a shopping district.

“Aristella is hungry.”

“We haven’t had anything to eat all day, I guess.”

The two girls looked down at the coins in their hands. As loyal servants of Shere Khan, they didn’t possess any money of their own.

“Should we get something to eat with this?”

“Dexia, how rash. It’s insanity to use something that could be trapped.”

“So you say, but we won’t get anything done just by standing here, right?”

Aristella was surely thinking the same thing, and she reluctantly nodded.

“That’s true.”

Dexia took a look around her. There was the smell of cooked meat mercilessly assaulting them from the butcher’s shop. She could see carts selling mouth-watering fruit juices. There were tea shops with lines of sweets on display. It was like temptations to overthrow the weak of heart were surrounding her. The two girls trembled at the dreadful situation they only just now noticed they were in.

“So, how about we go to that shish kebab shop for now?”

“How shallow, Dexia. Our funds are limited. We should charge into the inner citadel while we have the strength to spare.”

“Meat!”

“Sweets.”

Their futile dispute didn’t last long as both their stomachs growled.

“Haaah... Dessert is fine. Wanna get something already?”

“How unexpected. Dexia yielded.”

“...Whatever.”

Dexia huffed to the side and proceeded towards a tea shop that caught her eye.

“Wh-What?! This is...!”

The two of them raised their voices in unison. A terrifying dessert consisting of a tower of baked and frozen sweets was on display. Perhaps the shop owner was a sorcerer. The frozen dessert gave off a glossy and sweet sheen, yet showed no signs of melting. The girls gulped. Before they even knew it, they were pointing at the dessert.

“This, please.”

“Of course! Just one, right?”

“Huh? There’s two of us, so isn’t it obvious that we need two?”

“I mean... This isn’t really something little girls can finish on their own, you know?”

Taking a look around the shop, the other customers who had ordered the same dessert were eating them in groups. Such an amount was trivial for a sorcerer’s stomach, but now wasn’t the time for them to stand out. Dexia and Aristella exchanged looks, then reluctantly nodded.

“Then just one.”

“Coming right up!”

Dexia handed over her own coins to the waitress as Aristella

looked on in astonishment.

“How shocking. Has Dexia awoken to self-sacrifice?”

“Oh, come on, how about just thanking me honestly?”

Aristella looked at Dexia with a bewildered look for a moment, then eventually replied in a very quiet voice.

“...Thank you.”

“Y-You’re welcome!”

It would be difficult to react to something happening within such a cramped shop, so the two girls picked a seat towards the exit. After a short while, a giant dessert was brought over to their table.

“Oooh...”

The glass was large enough that one could mistake it for a vase. There was enough whipped cream and frozen sweets that one had to look up at it from the table. It truly was sufficient for both of them to share. The two girls exchanged nods, then picked up their spoons.

“So sweet! What’s with this? Isn’t it stupid to have so much sweetness? Mmmm... Hey! Aristella! That’s my half!”

“We never decided anything like that.”

In complete contrast to Dexia’s excitement, Aristella was silently putting her spoon to work and had managed to stretch out all the way to the other side of the dessert.

Well, whatever. Dexia pushed the glass over to Aristella.

“Leave some for me, okay?”

“...? You’re acting strange today, Dexia. Are you dying?”

“Why would I be?!”

Dexia didn’t intend to pick a fight despite raising her voice. She planted her elbow on the table and began muttering quietly.

“During that thing that happened... You covered for me, right?”

“What’s this about?”

Aristella tilted her head in confusion, and Dexia made a sour look.

“Back in Razel’s treasury, when we got rid of that little kid, the woman got serious, remember?”

The woman had used her terrifying sword skills to completely overwhelm Dexia, swiping the sword right out of her hand. Aristella then jumped in to cover for her and ended up suffering major wounds. All that even though Dexia was supposed to take on the woman while Aristella handled the boy.

She was more dangerous than that girl we fought during the Azazel case... Back when Dexia and Aristella crushed the church’s dark sect, Azazel, there was one girl who was abnormally stronger than the rest. She looked to be a tabaxi who wielded two blades. They even used the prohibited spell that was Shere Khan’s trump card, but were unable to finish her off. But that woman in the treasury saw through the same trick and pulverized it in an instant.

“Aristella doesn’t remember,” she said as the spoon came to a stop.

“Yeah, right. You were so close to dying there.”

“Aristella doesn’t remember, but if such a thing happened, then that was the rational thing to do.”

Dexia glared at Aristella, who began fiddling with the frills on her skirt as if dodging the topic. This was a tic of hers whenever she tried to play dumb.

“Haah... Well, that’s how I felt about it. So this makes us even!”

And with that, Aristella pushed the glass back towards Dexia.

“Aristella doesn’t know what you’re talking about. So you have some, too.”

“...Hmph. Don’t expect me to do something like this for you again.”

Dexia started putting her spoon to work to hide her embarrassment. And, after that went on for a while, about half the dessert had been consumed.

“Dexia, would Aristella dying be inconvenient?”

“Haah? Isn’t that...?”

She couldn’t answer. It wasn’t just a matter of inconvenience. She felt like she wouldn’t be able to bear losing the girl who was practically her other half.

“Aristella doesn’t get it...”

“Hmph. So why did you cover for me?”

“...Aristella doesn’t know, but... probably because Aristella didn’t like the idea of you dying.”

Dexia was somewhat astonished as Aristella drooped her shoulders.

“So isn’t that fine? The same goes for me.”

She had to kill a whole lot more for Shere Khan’s sake. She couldn’t stand not having Aristella with her for such times. She probably wouldn’t be able to fight if Aristella wasn’t with her. No matter how much they fought, that’s what this girl was to her. And yet, Aristella hung her head in a troubled manner.

“Aaah, whatever. Let’s stop thinking about this complicated crap! Let’s eat! Let’s kill! And let’s get back to Master Shere Khan quickly!”

She didn’t know who to kill yet, but that was all they were capable of doing. And yet, Aristella repeated herself once more.

“...Aristella doesn’t get it... not anymore...”

“What are—”

And just as Dexia tried to ask her what she meant...

“Don’t screw with me!”

An angry roar broke out as a man fell onto their table. It seemed a fight had broken out. Their half-eaten dessert was sent flying into the

air.

“Aaah...!”

They shrieked in sorrow. It would’ve been simple for them to catch it with sorcery under normal circumstances, but their reactions were hampered by Aristella’s state of mind. The dessert they’d gone out of their way to get pitifully splattered across the floor.

“I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Stop! Dexia!”

Dexia reached for her sword, but Aristella stopped her and brought her back to her senses.

Oh right, we can’t afford to stand out right now. But she had already raised her voice. The man who’d fallen on their table watched Dexia put her hand to her sword.

“The hell are you looking at, brat?!”

Things had become troublesome. The man appeared to be some sort of mercenary, judging from the sword at his waist and his build, which implied he was only capable of solving things through brute strength. It was clear he wasn’t a sorcerer.

It was simple for Dexia to kill such a pest, but the risk of attracting the attention of the Angelic Knights or Archdemon Zagan was too high in doing so. That’s because it was fairly likely her face had been seen back in the treasury. Dexia let out a groan, but suddenly, a dignified voice could be heard throughout the shop.

“You there, what’s this commotion about?”

Even though it was a calm, and even gentle voice, it had an intimidating air that felt like it would force one to prostrate themselves before it. The owner of said voice was an elf with silver hair. She appeared to be related to the church, seeing that she was accompanied by a young Angelic Knight.

My sorcery was erased? Sorcery was a technique that largely relied on drawing a magic circle or performing a long chant. That’s precisely why sorcerers walked around with several spells already prepared so they could be fired at any time. And the sorcery which Dexia had at the ready had been scattered by that single phrase.

No way, did she load mana into her voice...? Dexia shuddered upon realizing the true nature of what had happened. She had no way of knowing this, but it was the same sorcery Zagan used when he faced off against Orias. Just like how Valefor took the power Zagan gave her and developed it into her own as the Divine Echo, this girl obtained her own power while under Orias’ tutelage. It was a form of mana that could force any average sorcerer to faint on the spot.

What was even more terrifying, though, was the fact that the masses around her showed no signs of being frightened. This attack of hers was only directed at the man and Dexia. It was dreadfully

precise.

“Eep, what’s with you...? Wait, you’re...”

The mercenary trembled violently and shrank back. His earlier vigor had completely vanished, and he was now reduced to hemming and hawing pitifully. But Dexia couldn’t laugh at him. Rather, he was on the stronger side for keeping his consciousness.

I can’t move...! The same applied to Aristella. Normally, there was no way Dexia and Aristella stood no chance against their opponent, even against an elf. However, the sorcery they had prepared beforehand was destroyed. They were rendered powerless before the fight had even begun.

After confirming the man had lost all will to fight, the elf put her hand to her jaw.

“Get lost then if you aren’t going to fight. After you reimburse the shop, that is.”

“E-Eek!”

The man forced a pouch of coins into the hands of a nearby waitress then ran away like a startled hare. The elf then turned towards Dexia and Aristella.

Crap. It was perhaps possible for them to escape. However, it was impossible to do so unharmed. That’s just how much power the elf before them possessed. The girls froze up instinctively, and the elf suddenly held out her hand to them.

“Are you two alright?”

“Huh...?” Dexia mumbled, unsure of what was going on, but nodded anyway. “Uhhh, yes.”

“I see, then be careful not to cause any trouble. Both the Angelic Knights and the sorcerers are on edge today.”

The two girls were, of course, oblivious to the fact that Archdemon Andrealphus was currently visiting the town. Nevertheless, they realized this elf had come to help them. Those who knew what to look for could identify a sorcerer in an instant. This elf was apparently trying to stop sorcerers from the “outside” from getting caught up in any trouble.

“I-It’s none of your business,” Dexia said as she averted her gaze and refused the elf’s hand. “We didn’t want to cause any trouble either, you know?”

“I see. How about you, are you alright?”

The elf didn’t seem to be interested in the least and held out her hand to Aristella. Dexia didn’t notice it because she’d ended up stepping forward, but Aristella had fallen back onto her butt. Her gaze wandered around in bewilderment for a while, but she eventually took the elf’s hand timidly.

“Thank— Argh?!”

A crack resounded through the air as if the very world was creaking. The elf stumbled back as if she had been pushed away, and Aristella pulled her hand back in a hurry.

“Aristella!”

“Lady Nephteros!”

Dexia immediately supported Aristella by the shoulders, while the Angelic Knight next to the elf caught her before she fell over.

“What on earth happened...?” he asked.

“I-I’m okay. It was probably a static shock or something...”

The elf saw the Angelic Knight shift his focus to the sword at his waist and frailly shook her head. Aristella also looked like she was in a complete daze and didn’t know what had happened. It didn’t seem like either of them had done anything from Dexia’s perspective.

“Hey, Aristella. Are you okay?”

“...Aristella is fine. It was nothing.”

She nodded in confusion. It had to be quite serious for this normally expressionless girl’s agitation to be so clearly evident.

It kind of looked like some sort of resonance... Such a phenomenon was entirely possible between fellow elves or Archdemons, but Aristella and the elf had no such commonality between them.

“Did she really do nothing to you?”

“Probably. Aristella also didn’t do anything.”

They both remained completely baffled, and Aristella somehow or other managed to stand up. The Angelic Knight looked extremely wary of her, but there was no merit for the two girls to cause a disturbance here.

“If you’re fine, then it’d be best for you to leave here. Someone troublesome is in town today,” the elf said after gathering herself.

“Someone troublesome...?”

The elf refrained from replying and left the shop herself.

“What was that...?”

Dexia doubted her eyes as she watched the elf walk off. The shadow at her feet looked like it was grotesquely distorted. Dexia rubbed her eyes and took another look, but by that time the distortion was gone.

Was I seeing things...? There was nobody around who could answer her. And as she stood there stock still, Aristella pulled on her hand.

“Dexia, we should get away from here.”

After suddenly coming back to her senses, Dexia noticed that everyone was watching them. The girls were outsiders and they were just talking with an elf. There was no way such an elf wouldn’t be conspicuous in the middle of town. She even had an Angelic Knight as an escort.

It really is a bad idea to stick around here.

The girls forced their way through the crowd of people and ran off.



“Hahaha, we got a ton of freebies, huh?”

Selphy was carrying bags in both her hands with a cheerful smile as she walked next to Kuroka and Lilith. Kuroka was wearing the military uniform she got from Zagan the other day. It could also be called butler clothing, but that gave her more excuses to talk with Raphael, so she was quite happy with them.

She had her sword cane in hand. It was useless now that she could see again, but her short swords were essential if a fight were to break out. Her clothing was a little mismatched to her appearance, but it suited her more than the dress she got from Alshiera. She had to thank her for those clothes sooner or later as well.

The girls had finished their shopping and were now on their way back to the castle from Kianoides.

“Selphy, I won’t care if Mister Zagan gets angry at you for buying too much useless stuff, okay?” Kuroka said.

The three of them came to town to buy decorations for the grand bath. The larger items like statues and such were going to be delivered, but they were carrying the lighter goods like buckets and soap.

I feel like this kind of thing should be done by the owners of the castle, though... Kuroka had only just started living at the castle, so she wasn’t sure whether it was really alright for her to be picking things out for its interior design. And as she ruminated over that, Selphy raised her voice in great humor.

“It’s totally A-OK! Mister Zagan doesn’t, like, care about the small details. He also rewards people who hang in there and do their best!”

“Even if that’s the case for His Highness, Lady Nephy might get angry, you know?” Lilith chimed in.

“Huh...? Oh. Ahahah... It’ll be... okay. She won’t get angry... Right?”

Selphy turned pale and began trembling as Kuroka stared on in wonder.

“Does Nephy ever get angry?”

Kuroka only managed to start having proper conversations with her after it was decided that she would have her eyes healed, but even before that, she was quite focused on Nephy from afar. She was always gentle and quietly nestled up next to Zagan. Kuroka had a hard time imagining her getting angry.

“She gets angry if you insult His Highness,” Lilith said as she grabbed her shoulders and trembled.

“You insulted him?”

“I-I didn’t mean to! I just... um, have a sharp tongue.”

Now that she thought of it, the group had first met Lilith when they went to Atlastia. Nephy really seemed to be on edge at the time because of the abnormality of what’d happened to Zagan’s body. Apparently, something had happened at the time between Lilith and Nephy.

“I-It’s okay, Lilith. Miss Nephy isn’t, like, angry with you anymore, right?”

“I-I know that.”

Well, they did say that people who were usually gentle were all the more frightening when they were angry.

“Also, she scolds Miss Gremory, like, all the time.”

“Miss Gremory...? Oh, that makes sense.”

Kuroka had been toyed with like a doll the other day by Gremory. She was surely talented for Zagan to employ her as his entrusted retainer, but Kuroka didn’t really want to get involved with her.

It looks like she’s following us again today... Kuroka could tell that Gremory was following them from a small distance away and watching over them, perhaps as a guard. Incidentally, she could also sense Shax just a little farther away. Honestly speaking, she didn’t want him to be keeping such a distance from her forever, but Zagan’s consideration was all in vain and she hadn’t been able to properly speak with Shax yet. All that even though she’d had plenty of opportunities to do so, like asking for advice regarding the construction of the bath.

There was no way Lilith didn’t notice this situation, either. She snuck a glance behind her and sighed in astonishment.

“Hey, Kuroka, how long do you plan on leaving him be?”

“I-I’m not really ignoring him...”

Having said that, was it even possible to have a proper conversation with him when Raphael was glaring at him all the time?

Besides, it’d be fine if he at least said something himself...

She felt like her love was completely one-sided, and was beginning to lose confidence.

“Haah...”

Just as Kuroka sighed and Lilith was about to comfort her, Kuroka’s triangular ears pricked up.

“Lilith, stop.”

“Huh?”

Kuroka heard some hurried footsteps and raised her voice. Just a moment later, a small figure jumped out from the shadow of a building. Lilith managed to avoid bumping into them, and the figure also realized the close call and came to a stop.

“Fwah?”

“Huh?!”

Selphy also came to a stop, but she was just a step ahead of the others. Because of that, she ended up bumping into the figure. She dropped her bags and fell backward face up.

“Selphy!”

Kuroka let go of her sword cane and supported Selphy by the back using her left hand while catching the bags with her right. Her sword cane started falling to the ground, but Kuroka managed to catch it by wrapping her two tails around it.

“Phew...”

Kuroka Adelhide had a misfortunate disposition, but unlike Chastille, she wasn't really clumsy or anything. Lilith clapped her hands at the blinding speed which had just been put on display, and Kuroka shifted her attention to the one Selphy had bumped into. On her own, she had no choice but to stop at supporting Selphy.

“Are you okay...?”

And the moment she called out to them, she realized something.

Huh? This smell... The ones who bumped into Selphy were two girls. One dressed roughly with what looked like a breastplate and waistcloth, while the other wore a dress like Alshiera's. The one wearing a breastplate was the one to bump into Selphy and had fallen on her backside.

However, Kuroka faintly recognized her scent. The girl also recognized Kuroka, and plainly stiffened up.

“You're... Azazel's...”

She was instantly convinced of who these two girls were.

They're the last sorcerers I fought as part of Azazel! They were her sworn enemies who had stolen the light from her eyes. She didn't have the composure to consider why they were even here.

“Wait, Dexia—”

The girl in the dress tried to say something, but the girl in the breastplate put her hand to the longsword at her waist and began drawing it.

I'm at a disadvantage like this...!

Kuroka's decision was swift.

“Selphy, I'm throwing you.”

“Huh...?”

She forced the bags into Selphy's arms and tossed her out of range. But Lilith was still in danger. The non-combat civilian was standing there stock-still and had yet to grasp what was going on. Kuroka used both her hands to toss Selphy away, so she let go of her sword cane with her tails and wrapped them around Lilith's tail.

“Hyah?!”

Lilith's tail was her weak point. She sank to the floor as if losing all the strength in her hips, and a longsword sliced through the air right above her head.

Now that Kuroka was defenseless, the longsword came rushing at her throat. But by that time, Kuroka also managed to squat down and fall to the floor. She managed to completely escape a surprise attack while covering for two defenseless girls. The girl in the breastplate opened her eyes wide in shock. However, Kuroka wasn't so gentle that she would forgive an attack against her childhood friends.

"Take this!"

She kicked back her sword cane with her toes as she fell backward and rotated her body to drive her foot into the girl's face.

"Gah!"

The girl bent backward and screamed in pain, but Kuroka was the one to stiffen up in the next instant. The girl in the dress charged in over the other girl as she bent back. They didn't exchange any words, but could understand each other's intentions perfectly. They had terrifying coordination.

She had a scimitar in each hand, and her eyes were golden like the moon—they were the evil eyes of sorcery. Kuroka remembered those eyes. They were the last thing she had seen before losing her sight.

Kuroka didn't have her swords in hand, and her posture was completely broken after protecting Selphy and Lilith. She was completely defenseless. All that awaited her was death.

"Kurosuke!"

Something large and warm wrapped around her as if to block her from those golden eyes. And one step later, a dull shock ran through her body. The face of that warm body hung over Kuroka's head.

"Mister... Shax...?"

She could tell it was that awkward man just from his scent and touch. One of the girls' scimitars was stabbed into his back as he hugged Kuroka.

"Ah..."

It wasn't Kuroka who let out a shaken voice, but the girl wielding the scimitars. She was trembling as if she had just stabbed a close friend.

"What are you doing, Aristella?! Get back!"

The girl in the dress pulled out her scimitar and jumped back. At the same time, Shax lost all strength in his body and fell over.

"Mister Shax, why...?"

There was no need for her to even ask. She knew full well that this was the sort of man he was. Blood was pouring out of his back. As Kuroka desperately tried to stop the bleeding, Shax plopped his hand

on her head and petted her.

“Sorry. I got your clothes dirty again...”

“What are you saying? That doesn’t...”

“Sorry about... your other clothes, too. I knew... you were treating them precious... so I wanted to... return them to you... somehow or other...”

Kuroka pressed her face into Shax’s chest.

“Please stop. Don’t speak like this is the end.”

She then looked to the side. Selphy was thrown into the air, but didn’t fall against the ground. She was being caressed by a beautiful sorcerer. Taking a closer look, Lilith was also sitting on the floor by her feet. It was Enchantress Gremory, who was also watching from nearby.

“Now then, do you need some help?” she asked.

“...Yes. Please take care of Mister Shax.”

He appeared to have avoided a fatal blow, but the wound was still deep. He couldn’t even stand on his own.

“Hang on, Kurosuke.”

“It’s alright. I’m stronger than I look.”

Kuroka wouldn’t lose to anyone, especially as she was now. And, seeing that she had no intention of backing down, Shax gave in.

“You saw her eyes just now, right? Those are—”

“The Entangling Gaze. It destroys the sight of any who look into them, right?”

It was the sorcery they had used when Kuroka had fought against them once before. Even though she’d defended against it with the Moonless Sky, the light had still been stolen from her eyes. It was sorcery so atrocious that it was designated as a prohibited spell several hundred years ago.

“That makes things faster.” Shax nodded as sweat ran down his brow. “You can block it by not looking into her eyes.”

Kuroka got by safely from the Entangling Gaze earlier because Shax had covered her field of view. He surely used his body as a shield so that he could verify that for himself. Just how little did he think of his own life?

“Prohibited spells aren’t the type you can use willy-nilly. The one in the dress should be out of shots. Be careful of the other one.”

“Okay.”

Having said that, it was completely natural for a master to read their opponent’s movements by looking them in their eyes. Kuroka was just in the process of doing so precisely because she had regained her vision. Fighting an opponent head-on without looking them in the eyes was a near-impossible undertaking. Nevertheless, she stood before the sword cane that was lying on the floor.

Picking it up would create an opening. The two girls were likely waiting for that. Both of them were tensed up with their swords at the ready.

“So this is what this mission’s about, then, Aristella?”

“It’s not, Dexia. Aristella suggests a retreat. This is probably a mistake.”

“What’s a mistake...? In any case, we’re not gonna be able to run away unless we deal with her.”

These girls had calmly gotten Lilith and Selphy involved, and even injured Shax. Kuroka naturally had no obligation to let them get away.

“Are you done talking?”

Kuroka quietly got her breathing in order and took a step forward. She couldn’t raise her gaze beyond the girls’ shoulders. She had to read their movements based on scent and the feeling on her skin.

“Samurai of the Adelhide School, Kuroka Adelhide. Prepare yourself.”

She didn’t name herself as part of Azazel, nor did she choose to step forth as Zagan’s subject. She chose her name as the clan which stood at the side of the legendary Silver-Eyed King of Liucaon.

She stomped on her sword cane and it flew up into the air. And using that as a signal, the girl in the breastplate swung her longsword. She was far out of range, and yet, her blade stretched out.

A chain sword. She’d seen this sword the last time they’d fought. However, its irregular movements and range weren’t something one could grasp by eye.

“Huh?”

The chain sword only lightly grazed Kuroka’s bangs. It was as if the sword itself had dodged her. This was the result of her heightened sense of perception that she’d gained from losing her eyesight. As she grabbed her sword cane as if nothing had happened, the girl in the dress charged in as if to say Kuroka would definitely not be permitted to draw her blades. Her scimitars closed in on Kuroka’s torso and neck from both sides.

“Wha—?”

Kuroka’s sword cane neatly sat diagonally between both scimitars. She then spun the cane around and repelled both swords. By the time that was over, she had already finished drawing both her blades.

“Keehee, she’s like a dancing dervish. The movement used for defense connects straight to the attack,” Gremory said with a whistle.

The girl in the dress standing before Kuroka turned pale.

“Dammit! Get away from her!”

The girl in the breastplate once more swung her chain sword. And, once more, it looked like it dodged Kuroka on its own, but the

other girls used that opening to roll across the ground and escape.



“Tch. She’s strong. Let’s keep our distance, Aristella.”

Kuroka was armed with her short swords. Her range was limited, so fighting from a distance was an exemplary tactic. These two girls weren’t warriors, they were sorcerers. Not only that, but an attack from both sides would also surely be capable of pushing Kuroka back. However, that course of action was useless in this case.

“Can you dodge this?”

The chain sword drew an abnormal path through the air quite literally like a snake. No matter how much she excelled in seeing through the sword’s movements, this wasn’t something she could dodge since the blade moved as if it had a will of its own.

“Kuroka!”

Lilith screamed upon seeing the blade tear through her.

“Huh...?”

But the one who sounded completely dumbfounded was the girl wielding the chain sword. Kuroka vanished as the blade cut her apart, and another Kuroka appeared on either side of where she was. It wasn’t that there were two Kurokas. She took a step to the side and swayed in such a way that her figure appeared to multiply like a mirage.

“What the...? I’ve never heard of sorcery like this!”

“The Adelhide School’s Misty Night. This isn’t sorcery, it’s an art.”

Kuroka’s footsteps produced no sound, and even though she stood before them like this, they couldn’t sense her movements. This was an art that imprinted an afterimage in one’s eyes by moving at a varying tempo. This was a secret art that took talented samurai decades of training to master, but after going through a turbulent life and regaining her sight, Kuroka had arrived at this ability at the tender age of sixteen.

The two girls were surrounded by countless afterimages of Kuroka before they even knew it.

“Very well... Let’s begin.”

The many afterimages raised their short swords all at once. Even though there was only one real Kuroka, there was no technique in existence that could identify her real blades.

“Agh!”

“Ugh!”

Nevertheless, these girls were sorcerers with many years of combat experience. They stood back-to-back and somehow or other managed to avoid any fatal wounds.

“Dexia, wall.”

“Right!”

They leaped out of the siege of afterimages while swinging their

swords and managed to get away from the Misty Night. They charged towards a sturdy-looking brick wall and pressed their backs against it. With this, they only had to focus on what was in front of them. The girl wearing a breastplate then charged mana into her eyes.

“With this, you won’t be able to look me in the eye, can you now? Entangling Gaze!”

Kuroka swung her right hand through the air the moment the girl’s eyes turned golden. This was the hand she was using to press down on Shax’s wound. The blood that had covered her hand flew through the air and splattered across the girl’s face.

“Gah?!”

Powerful sorcerers had many limitations to match their strength. The Entangling Gaze required direct eye contact precisely because of its destructive potential. To put it another way, there was no need to dodge it if the caster’s own sight was blocked. And, with blood in her eyes, this girl was a simple and defenseless target.

“Dexia!”

As Kuroka raised her sword overhead, the girl wearing a dress jumped forth and pushed down the other girl to cover for her. Kuroka’s blade came to a complete stop right at the tip of the girl’s nose.

“What are you doing, Aristella?! Move!”

“No way.”

Kuroka let out a sigh as she watched the two trembling girls. She then punched the girl in the dress right on the nose with all her might.

“Gwuh!”

“Aristella?!”

Kuroka ignored the screaming girl and grabbed the girl in the dress by the collar.

“...I don’t really think it’s possible, but do you two truly believe something so convenient like you won’t get killed yourselves even though you kill others?”

Kuroka used to be an assassin for the dark side of the church. She had killed many sorcerers to fulfill the grudge of her people. That was the sin that Kuroka had to bear for the rest of her life. However, she never once fought while thinking she wouldn’t die.

That should have also applied to Nephy when she had let her people get slaughtered. That’s why Kuroka sympathized with and respected her. Kuroka had a desire to meet her end in battle, but the simple act of stealing the lives of others placed one’s own life on the scale, as well. That’s why she never thought of getting revenge against those who took her eyesight away.

So what was this farce before her? Killing people without considering each other’s deaths was a foolish thought even the worst

assassins didn't harbor. This time it was the girl in the breastplate who was covering the girl in the dress, who had fallen to the ground.

"S-Sorry. Sorry. We won't attack you anymore. So forgive us."

Kuroka looked down at her with disdain as the girl despicably pleaded for her life.

I lost to this manner of opponent...? They had no pride, no elegance, no guts, and no resolve. Even with all their talent, they truly were just children. Kuroka turned her back to them and picked up her sheath.

"I'll let you go this time. You didn't kill Mister Shax, after all."

The girl in the dress was perfectly capable of skewering both Shax and Kuroka at once. The reason she stopped surely wasn't simply because she was shaken. This girl had enough doubts as to what they were doing to at least hesitate.

Kuroka practically spat out at them, and the girl in the breastplate supported the other girl with her shoulder and left.

Kuroka then turned to Shax and her two childhood friends.

"Sorry. Were you frightened?"

"Sorry?! That's the wrong thing to say!"

"Uwaaaah! Kurokaaa!"

Kuroka was knocked down by their ramming attack.

"Don't be so reckless. I thought you were going to die."

"Yeah. You're a girl too, Kuroka."

Kuroka wasn't able to do anything but make a troubled look at having worried them so.

Shax then held out his hand.

"I'd also like to ask you to cut your recklessness down..."

"I don't want to be told that after you did something even more reckless." She huffed to the side, but still grasped his hand. "But... I'm happy you saved me."

Kuroka was finally able to smile.

"Keeheehee, nice love power! Thank you for the meal!"

Although, the granny making a fuss next to them ruined the moment.



"It looks like Kuroka and the others got through things safely."

"Yeah."

Nephy and Zagan looked down on the scene from above while riding a broom. He'd noticed the presence of Shere Khan's subordinates the moment they entered the town. There was a fairly high chance that Kuroka's group was their target, so he put his date on hold to observe them, but it turned out to be needless anxiety.

In any case, I didn't sense Bifrons' presence. At the very least, this was not Bifrons' plan. There was a possibility that Shere Khan was

plotting something, but that would be a poor move. Even if those twins won against Kuroka, Gremory was still there, and Zagan was observing from above.

They were severely lacking in means to slip past Zagan to kidnap Kuroka. It was likely that the battle just now wasn't planned by anyone and was just a simple coincidence.

Anyway, that Kuroka got a lot stronger than expected. Shere Khan's subordinates were in no way weak. Even though she completely overwhelmed them, Zagan had yet to grant her any power. It was entirely within the realm of reason that her blade could even reach an Archdemon were she to become even stronger.

Well, it was somewhat nerve-racking to watch, though. Kuroka wasn't wearing any sort of protective gear today. It was perhaps a better idea to have her wear Alshiera's dress despite being a little harder to move in. It really was good fortune that she got through it completely unharmed.

"What shall we do about those two?" Nephy asked as she watched the twins run away.

"Leave them be. They'll serve as a good trail if they return to Shere Khan."

The girl in the dress ate a faceful of Kuroka's fist, so there likely wasn't a need for further punishment. It also appeared that her spirit was utterly crushed.

"Besides..." Zagan said with a squint. "Kuroka didn't seem to notice, but there's something awfully suspicious going on."

"What do you mean?"

Nephy cocked her head curiously, and Zagan hesitated as to how he could answer. However, his principle was to keep no secrets from Nephy. He was worried, but didn't keep his silence.

"Do you remember that dirty little brat Stella brought along on Alshiere Imera?"

"Yes, Lisette, was it?"

Nephy nodded, and Zagan continued in a stern tone.

"Those two were the spitting image of Lisette."

"Ah...!" Nephy spontaneously turned around to look at Zagan.

Having said that, Lisette was covered in dirt and grime on Alshiere Imera. She also had quite the stench about her, so it was fairly reasonable that Kuroka didn't notice. Even Raphael, who had spent a short amount of time with those girls, didn't realize this either. But even so, as a fellow alleyway rat, there was no way Zagan would mistake her.

"Now that I think of it, Lady Stella said that she took Lisette in because she was being attacked."

"I see, so there's a connection."

Meaning Shere Khan was definitely involved.

The only thing that immediately springs to mind is Lisette also being Shere Khan's subordinate... However, she was far too ignorant of sorcery for that. Moreover, the fact that those twins had the same face as her weighed on his mind. They might have been homunculi like Nephteros, but homunculi possessing an ego couldn't be pumped out constantly. Besides, Zagan could tell whether someone was a homunculus or not by "looking" at them. Meaning there was something else about them...

"Seems there's a need to give Stella a warning about this."

If things were just as Michael said, then Stella was currently at the church headquarters. Regardless of the number of inexperienced newcomers there, it still wasn't a place even an Archdemon could rashly mess around in. It was likely safe there for the moment.

"Anyway, this grates on my nerves," Zagan mumbled.

"Hm...? Oh, do you mean...?" Zagan was being vague, but Nephy realized what he meant. "Lady Stella met Lisette in the same place as you...?"

"Yeah. It's probably the same alleyway. Lisette was one of the brats I talked to at the time, after all."

It was back when Zagan was gathering information on Marc and taught those children simple self-defense. It may have been better to investigate the area a little more. Far too many important meetings had happened there. It was even worth considering whether the place was cursed. It wasn't amusing for Zagan to have his little siblings of the streets get involved in any more strange incidents.

"Well, Kuroka and Shax look to be fine," Zagan said as he let out a sigh of frustration. "Let's head for the church, Nephy."

"Of course, Master Zagan."

And, with their date over, Nephy flew her broom swiftly over to the church. After arriving, they were let through to the waiting room right away. The three idiots glared at Zagan as always, but they really had gotten used to it already. They even brought out tea and treats.

"Everyone is so kind."

"Well, that's because you're here today, Nephy."

Zagan wouldn't receive this sort of treatment on his own.

Chastille arrived a short while later.

"It's unusual for the two of you to visit the church at the same time."

Now that he thought of it, Zagan always came to the church on his own when he had business. He also didn't come along with Nephy when she came to play with her friend.

"How about holding a ceremony while you're here?" Chastille asked with a charming smile.

“A c-c-c-c-c-c-ceremony?!”

“Hawawawawa, um, that’s a little early... for us... I think...”

Chastille looked on nostalgically as the Archdemon and his bride immediately became incoherent.

"Well, that's exactly what makes you two who you are, huh?"

Her tongue was this sharp in work mode? He never thought she'd have the courage to tease an Archdemon. Zagan endured his embarrassment and began scoffing.

“Hmph. And *you’re* the one making that sort of joke? You two couldn’t even have a proper conversation during Alshire Imera.”

"Fwuh?! H-H-H-H-H-H-H-How do you know that?!"

“How? That’s my castle!”

“Gaaaah! I shouldn’t have gone to an Archdemon’s castle!”

Chastille's work mode mask was torn off in an instant and her crybaby self was now fully exposed.

“Please calm down, Chastille. Everyone understands. Master Zagan, please don’t be so mean.”

“Ugh...”

Nephy's words brought Chastille to her knees.

I know you have no ill intent, but you totally delivered the finishing blow, Nephy... In any case, they didn't come to the church to pick on Chastille. As such, Zagan cut to the chase to wake Chastille from her hazy state, even as he found her quite pitiful.

“Chastille, there’s something I’d like you to investigate.”

“Something to investigate...?”

She somehow or other managed to reboot her work mode and stood back up. He couldn't get anywhere with her crybaby self, but she truly was talented at doing her job. After confirming that she had regained her composure, Zagan went into the details.

"I think Clavwell was his name? How long was he the head of the church here?"

The previous cardinal of this church had apparently assassinated multiple Angelic Knights in the past. That dark history of the church was exposed in broad daylight when Chastille was appointed as the local leader. All those who had mysteriously vanished or died of unknown causes were also made public.

“Cardinal Clavwell...?” Chastille pinched her brow and searched her memories. “I wonder... I’ll need to investigate to determine the exact period, but I’m pretty sure he served for a fairly long time. Three generations of Archangels including myself served under him, after all.”

“Three generations...? Meaning it was more than five years ago. Then were there any people from this church who held important positions and went missing, or perhaps someone who came to this

church and went missing?"

Nephy surely realized what Zagan was getting at as she quietly gulped.

"Master Zagan, you can't possibly mean...?"

"It's about 50-50."

There was a limit to the number of people who could stand on equal grounds with Marchosias and Michael in this town, such as the upper brass of the church—Archangels and cardinals—or perhaps...

"Do you mean to say someone you know may have been here?" Chastille asked as she knit her brows.

"It's possible."

"...Got it. Please wait a moment."

Chastille left the waiting room and returned about half an hour later, carrying a bundle of bulky-looking parchments.

"This is the list of casualties and missing personnel over the last five years. Most of them are Angelic Knights who died in the line of duty."

"Thanks."

"Also, this may be unrelated since it doesn't have anything to do with Kianoides specifically..."

Chastille lowered her voice and took a careful look around the room.

"There's one more authority in the church who met a mysterious end. I also found out about it just recently myself..."

"An authority in the church? Who?"

It must have been something quite hard to say. Chastille's expression stiffened up. She then nodded and whispered as quietly as she could.

"His Holiness the Pope. I tried looking into it, but I don't know the exact time it happened."

"The Pope?!"

"Shhh, you're too loud."

Zagan came to his senses and lowered his voice again.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Records of his official activities came to a stop several years ago. The last one I found was... five years ago."

Zagan was greatly shaken.

Impossible. Marc was... the Pope...? However, many points coincided with that. The most conspicuous of which were the names Seraph Hunters and Azazel. If Alshiera was telling the truth, then half of Marc's life was dedicated to the fight against Azazel. It was entirely reasonable that he would name the dark side of the church Azazel.

The Marc I remember loved that sort of irony. There was also the name seraph. The word itself had angelic connotations. It was

abnormal how nonexistent the term was within the church. If the church itself squashed the use of the term, then it was entirely believable.

Above all else, it was extremely probable that Marc was one of the three people who'd created the Seraph Hunters alongside Alshiera. Alshiera was the guard, Marchosias became an Archdemon, so the last one becoming the church was far too natural a development.

But it was still hard to accept, so Zagan tried prodding a little further.

"Chastille, have you met the Pope before?"

"His Holiness...? Hmm, about that..." Chastille looked somewhat troubled. "I'm pretty sure I met him, but I don't really remember. It may just be my imagination."

And that was unshakable proof. Zagan was at a complete loss for words.

How idiotic... It had been three months since Alshiera gave him the clue of searching for Marc. And then there were the incidents during the church festival of Alshiere Imera, as well as what happened in the church treasury of Raziel.

It ended up being rather trivial. Zagan was headed straight toward Marc, but simply didn't notice the answer right before his eyes. To begin with, he had investigated Marchosias and the Sacred Swords, but held no interest whatsoever in the church or its leader. He was being so idiotic that he could only sigh, and just then...

"Tch."

Zagan sharply clicked his tongue. Kianoides was his domain. It was obviously protected by countless barriers which he could use to track individuals by mana, even if not to the extent that Barbatos could. And the signal he was tracing with his barrier had suddenly vanished.

"What's the matter, Master Zagan?"

Nephy could tell this wasn't a trivial matter.

"The signal I was getting from Shere Khan's two subordinates just vanished."

At the very least, they were no longer within Kianoides' barrier.

"So... Did they escape the town, I wonder...?"

She asked for verification, but there was a hint of pain in her voice. Nephy surely knew the truth.

"One may have escaped," Zagan said as he shook his head. "But the other one didn't... It seems someone finished off one of the twins."

The frail future of those pitiful girls had been cruelly shut off.



"Haaah, haaah..."

Aristella and Dexia wandered into an alleyway in Kianoides after running away from Kuroka.

"They can't be chasing us this far off, right?" Dexia asked while breathing heavily.

She still had bloodstains on her face, but she'd managed to regain her vision. After confirming there wasn't anyone else nearby, she touched Aristella's cheek.

"Aristella, show me your face... Shit, do you normally just punch a girl in the face like that?!"

Her face looked to be fairly swollen and was even bruised, but Aristella shook her head.

"...Aristella is fine. We were lucky to get off this lightly."

"Hey, Aristella. Don't tell me you seriously believe what she said?"

"..."

She couldn't answer. She had first begun harboring doubts back in Raziel's treasury. The woman they fought there was so strong it sent chills down her spine. That was the first time Aristella had felt death so close to her. And yet, she was far more terrified of losing Dexia.

That's why she had taken a hit for her twin. She hated the thought of losing her. She feared it far more than dying herself.

Aristella doesn't get it anymore... She was well aware that the two of them had never considered being killed, even without Kuroka telling her that. It was natural for the people they were killing to try and kill them back. There were also cases where someone they failed to kill would try to get revenge. So, would they be able to complain if they were killed in such a way? The two of them had been dancing atop a thin layer of ice, or perhaps even atop a bed of spears.

"Aristella is scared..."

If they were to continue as they had been doing, they would both die. But above all else...

The people Aristella killed may have been the same... She never even recognized the people she killed as humans before. But now she realized that the people she killed may have had people who thought of them the same way Aristella thought of Dexia.

Thinking of how she'd mowed down such lives without giving it a single thought made her so scared that it became hard to breathe. That's because if Dexia was killed, Aristella would chase her killer to the ends of the continent.

In other words, it was hard to argue that the same could happen to them. There were probably multitudes of such enemies they didn't even know about. The girl they just fought today was someone they bumped into by pure coincidence, and she had plenty of reason to kill them.

Dexia grabbed Aristella tightly by the collar.

“Do you even know what you’re saying? Do you plan on betraying Master Shere Khan?”

“But... At this rate, Aristella and Dexia will die one day... Aren’t you scared?”

“That’s...”

“Aristella doesn’t get it anymore...” she said as she cradled her knees. “What do we do? What’s the proper thing to do?”

“Isn’t that obvious?! We just have to obey Master Shere Khan’s orders. Isn’t that why we were created?”

“But Aristella is scared of dying... Aristella doesn’t want to be thrown away...”

Dexia embraced the trembling girl.

“It’s okay... Master Shere Khan won’t throw us away. We failed our mission. I’m sure we’ll get scolded a little, but let’s go back. Okay?”

“...Mm.”

Dexia was kind. That’s surely why Aristella came to realize something.

Aristella... can’t fight anymore. She was scared of holding a sword. And just as she clung to Dexia tightly...

“Heeheehee... I found a *naughty* child.”

A sweet, yet endlessly twisted laugh resounded through the alleyway. It came from a formless “shadow.” To be more specific, it vaguely had the form of a “person.” Such was the case, but Aristella couldn’t recognize it as such. It was like her brain refused to do so.

Aristella’s cognition is being blocked...? Was it sorcery? Or perhaps there was some other power at work which prevented her from directly observing the shadow. Two golden eyes floated within the shadow. They were like moons hanging over the dead of the night. Just the thought of those eyes looking at her spurred a sense of fear within her that felt like it would drive her mad.

“Aah...”

She figured it out. This was the same as the prohibited spell, the Entangling Gaze, that was granted to them by Shere Khan. Their sorcery was an imitation of these eyes before her.

“Wh-What...?”

Dexia shrank back upon sensing the mysterious being. She was actually able to maintain a fair amount of sanity by being able to do so. That’s because Aristella was no longer able to even scream after having had her spirit weakened in the fight against Kuroka.

“R-Run... Dexia...”

Upon somehow managing to wring out her voice, Aristella realized her own foolishness. Dexia’s face froze up as if she had sensed

death, and she put on a smile as if it was inevitable.

"I'm telling you it's okay. I'll protect you, Aristella."

"No..."

Her warning was in vain, and Dexia swung her chain sword at the shadow, which neither defended or evaded. It simply took the blade on defensively.

"What... the...?"

The chain sword made a dull thud as if it had struck a mountain of sand and began crumbling apart.

No... It's being eaten! Shadow-like debris crawled up the chain sword and decomposed it along the way. It encroached on the blade at a terrifying speed and was quickly making its way to Dexia's hand.

"Wh-What the hell is this?!"

She let go of her sword in a hurry, and that was the moment her fate was sealed.

"Huh...?"

Before she knew it, the shadow was right in front of her eyes. It was close enough to touch its nose against Dexia's, and it felt like the shadow's face warped with a smile.

"Eep..."

There was no way to avoid that golden gaze at point-blank range. Aristella had no way of knowing what Dexia saw in them as she jolted in place with her eyes rolling to the back of her head before collapsing to her knees. The shadow didn't even look at the now completely immobile Dexia. Instead, it began whispering in an intoxicating voice.

"Teeheehee. What a naughty child. What a foolish child. But what a clever child, for you have opened the door for my sake. Alas! Aah! I'm coming to greet you now! My beloved Master ——!"

Who is she talking to...? Wait... Is it... Aristella...? Those golden eyes weren't looking at her, but she could feel that the shadow's consciousness was focused on her.

"Pl...ease..."

Aristella somehow managed to squeeze her voice out through her trembling lips, and immediately regretted doing so. The shadow's golden eyes tumbled about and shifted their focus over to her. She could feel any and every negative emotion within them which couldn't be simply described as malice, hatred, or despair.

Her consciousness began to fade. It would've been easier to just faint on the spot. That would've been salvation in this situation, but Aristella's other half came into her vision.

Not... yet... she had to save Dexia. She was scared of dying, but she was far more scared of losing Dexia. That's why she bit down on her lips and maintained her consciousness through the pain.

"Please... save..."

The shadow squinted in amusement at her pleading.

“What a cute child. What a pitiful child. Teehee, heeheehee. Alas, that won’t do. No matter how much I wish it to be so, nobody shall answer your pleas. Eeheeheeheehee.”

Cold wetness ran down her cheeks. It seemed that tears that flowed out of fear were cold. Aristella lost all feeling in her limbs. She no longer had the strength to grip her sword. But, even so, she earnestly raised her voice.

“Please... spare Dexia.”

The shadow stopped laughing.

“Aristella... will do... anything... So please... spare Dexia...”

The two of them were already as good as dead. She knew there was no way her pleas would be answered. But even so, even if there was nobody who would answer her, if there was just that one chance, then it was possible for Dexia to start over.

“If you live... you’ll surely...”

Aristella felt like the shadow’s eyes trembled with sadness upon hearing her earnest prayer.

“...I see.”

The shadow’s hand touched Aristella’s cheeks. They were cold. No, cold didn’t even begin to describe them. Those dreadful hands felt like they even froze her soul. They thrust the fact that her life was now over right into her face whether she liked it or not.

“What a gluttonous child. What a pathetic child. Yes, yes, I shall pity you. So at the very least—”

Aristella was now trembling to the point she could no longer breathe, and the shadow greatly opened its mouth directly above her.

“Shall we become one?”

Aristella may have screamed, but with the shadow’s mouth enveloping her entirely, her voice was no longer able to reach anyone. Something then flowed into her. It was so cold that it felt like her lips would tear apart and fall off, yet the thing flowing down her throat was scorching hot. Her limbs no longer had the strength to even struggle and could do nothing more than convulse pitifully. The blue ribbon tying up her hair came undone. Tears poured from both of her wide-open eyes.

Aristella is... disappearing...

She was vanishing.

She was melting.

Her entire body was vanishing, her life was melting, her heart was disappearing. Her memories of Shere Khan petting her head, of fighting with Dexia, of that girl who scolded her for the first time, all of it began to fade. And before long, she even lost the ability to feel fear. She lost the ability to think of anything.

But... But even so... Her thoughts shifted to her other half, whose name she couldn't even remember anymore, who was right next to her. This girl was better than her at sorcery. That was why she'd decided to improve her swordsmanship to protect her.

Live... The light from a magic circle spread out. This would be her last teleportation spell. There was no way the shadow didn't notice, but it did nothing. It allowed her this act.

As anything and everything vanished from her mind, the last thing she saw wasn't her other half, but that tabaxi girl. She had gotten unbelievably strong compared to before. Aristella felt both fear and admiration toward her. If only she had more time, then...

Maybe Aristella... could have become... like that... too...

Aspiration.

That was the last feeling Aristella held.



"Lady Nephteros! Are you alright?!"

"Huh?!"

Nephteros woke up from having her shoulders shaken. It seemed that she had lost consciousness.

"Richard...?"

"That's right. Are you unharmed?"

Her head was in pain. She felt like she had seen a horrible nightmare.

"Umm...? What happened...?"

"Do you not remember? You weren't feeling well after you met those two sorcerers this afternoon and decided to rest, and then..."

Richard looked around the area. They were in a dirty alleyway. It wasn't an appropriate place to get some rest.

"I booked a room at the inn, but you vanished when I stepped aside to get you a drink. Do you not remember?"

Nephteros shook her head.

"Sorry. I don't. I more or less remember those two sorcerers, though..."

They were two girls who got into a fight with some punk in town. Her memories after that were all a haze.

"Let's return to the church for now. I believe it would do you well to rest for the day."

"Yeah... I feel sorry for my mother, but I'll have to skip today's training."

The two of them didn't even notice. There was a tattered blue ribbon on the ground right at their feet. A blue ribbon that belonged to one of those two twins.



Chapter IV: The Idiot Trying to Peek Is Better Off Dead, but I Wanted to at Least Save the Pitiful Girl

“Now then, all the actors have risen to the stage.”

Tiny debris-like crystals were floating in the night sky far above Zagan’s castle. They were a portion of Bifrons’ body. The Archdemon thinned out their very existence to escape Zagan’s detection, but this was a dangerous state where losing their focus could scatter their very own ego. Zagan truly was a terrifying man for Bifrons to have to resort to such means to evade his detection.

“Zagan, you certainly are strong. You demonstrate both deep compassion and severity. You truly have the caliber of a king. However, what will save the people is not a king... but a hero.”

Kings didn’t save people. It was heroes who protected, guided, and saved them.

“So, which are you?”

Bifrons’ course of action didn’t change in either case. The only thing that changed a little would be the role they played.

You’ve reduced me to such a state. I’ll have you come along with me on this path.

However, everything that would happen from here had to be carried out with the utmost caution. The entire world was liable to be destroyed ever so easily. “That” was a monster who had already once destroyed the world, after all.

“In any case, the ‘door’ has already been opened.”

There was no turning back. The Eldest Marchosias. Wise Dragon Orobas. Head Archangel Ginias Galahad. The door that was sealed shut on a mountain of sacrifices was about to be breached.

Thus, Bifrons would do their best to dance a merry dance in the middle of that destruction.

That’s why they would keep silent and watch until that time came.

The curtain was going to rise on this grand stage soon in any case.



Zagan turned around with a grim expression upon sensing

something. Several days had passed since he'd discovered Marc's identity in Kianoides. The grand bath had been completed, and they were having a modest grand opening for it at the castle.

It was, naturally, being held in the grand bath itself. The party was being held in a Liucaon style with liquor floating atop the water. There was also some juice prepared for minors like Foll and Lilith.

Zagan had informed his other subordinates that they were free to participate, but there was a surprising amount of interest, and the grand bath that had at first seemed far too large was already full. In complete contrast to Zagan's imagination, it seemed even sorcerers loved baths. He spent some time reflecting on not building it somewhat sooner.

He'd planned on going in as well, but pulled back in a hurry upon sensing an anomaly.

"Is something the matter, Sir Zagan?" Kimaris, who entered the changing room before him, asked in a cautious voice.

"Nothing. I have some minor business to take care of. You lot go ahead and get started. I'll be back shortly."

"...Understood. We'll do just that."

Kimaris surely understood his intent. Zagan watched his reliable subordinate bow and walk off into the bath before heading down the corridor which connected to the castle. And there he found his undesirable friend smiling fearlessly.

"Yo, Zagan."

"Barbatos. How rare of you to be out of your damned shadow."

"It's 'cause you've been popping barriers up like a fucking hedgehog. I can't even open the exit to my shadow like this, can I?"

This man did, in fact, possess enough talent to easily hijack Zagan's sorcery. That's why the barriers here were more scrupulously fortified than usual. Zagan gave his defenses a passing grade for now, seeing that Barbatos was unable to trespass.

"So, do you plan on joining the party?"

"Hey, you're not gonna say I can't come, are you? I did a whole lotta dangerous crap at your request, ya know?"

"Of course not. My principle is to reward those who devote themselves to me. Even you are no exception to this. Enjoy yourself to your heart's content."

Barbatos shrugged his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"Now ain't that a relief. I'd have to go drown my sorrows in booze if you drove me away here."

As his undesirable friend tried to walk past him, Zagan firmly grabbed his shoulder.

"In any case, how strange this is."

"What? Something weird happen?"

“Yeah. I mean, that direction leads to—” Zagan charged his following words with mana. “The women’s bath.”

The air itself trembled at his voice. Just as he said, Barbatos wasn’t walking toward the men’s bath, but the women’s bath. He turned around with a blank look on his face and went on to speak as if this was perfectly obvious.

“Your barrier’s quite impressive. Even I can’t sneak in from the outside. I’ll give you my honest praise for that.”

“...So?”

“But I can connect my shadow from the inside. Well, it’s such a short distance connection that it’d be pretty meaningless. But... I guess it’d be just enough to pass through one wall or so.”

“Hmm?”

Zagan strengthened his grip as if to crush his shoulder, but Barbatos continued without hiding his intentions at all.

“The crybaby’s just past here in the bath.”

This was the bath’s grand opening, so Chastille, Kuu, and others from the church were invited.

“Meaning?”

“I’d be able to peek,” Barbatos firmly said with a bloodcurdling voice, as if he was to take a step into near-certain death.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Single Petal.”

Zagan drove in his black flames without hesitation. He didn’t swing his fist as usual. The extent of how serious he was could be seen from the mere fact that he used one of his trump cards meant to kill Archdemons.

“Holy shit?! You just seriously tried to kill me!”

Regrettably, Barbatos managed to evade the attack with miraculous agility.

“Of course I did. I obtained power for the very purpose of getting rid of pests like you.”

Nephy and Foll were obviously in the women’s bath. Zagan would stake his title of Archdemon on his ability to keep anyone from peeking.

“Do that on your own time. You can sneak in on Chastille bathing any time you want, can’t you?”

“I went outta my way to try today ‘cause she’s always got her Sacred Sword with her even in the bath!”

“Like I care.”

In any case, he really was trying to peek. Barbatos was the lowest of the low. Well, it was good news that Chastille still had a sense of virtue. Zagan was somewhat worried that she would rub off on Nephy if she continued being an amazon all the time.

He had no compassion for this man. And as he charged his fist

with mana, Barbatos whispered to him like the devil.

“You’re also interested in your bride’s naked body, aint’cha?”

Zagan froze up on the spot.

“Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-You fool! Like I could do something so shameless!”

“You a kid in fucking puberty? The best part about women are their tits and ass, right? What’s wrong with indulging in that? Well, the crybaby’s kinda lacking in that regard, but...”

“Everything’s wrong with it! That kind of thing should be built upon proper consent, or rather...”

“Haaah, what a load of shit.”

Zagan felt like he heard something snap in his head.

“Hmm, I see. I get it. Your definition of manliness is to cowardly sneak around in the shadows to peek instead of boldly coming in from the front, huh? I have to sympathize with Chastille a little here.”

“...Huh? What’s the crybaby got to do with this?”

Zagan really wanted to spend the next hour pressing him for an answer as to who exactly it was that he was putting in all this effort to peek on, but came back to his senses.

“Hmm? Well, you have a point. She certainly is just a stranger who has no interest in you. She won’t really be troubled by your death.”

Zagan ground his heel into a landmine, and a vein popped out of Barbatos’ forehead.

“You want me to fucking kill you?!”

“You’ll be the one to die.”

Thus, these undesirable friends and lifelong rivals inevitably clashed once more for an endlessly trivial reason.





“...? Does it seem somewhat noisy outside again?”

The women’s side of the grand bath.

Kuroka’s triangular ears twitched as she filled a bucket with water. The bath was equipped with enough showers for ten people thanks to the efforts of Zagan, Shax, and Gremory. There were such facilities for the masses in Kianoides, but this castle was likely the only place where one could get hot water just from twisting a knob.

Kuroka was washing her hair by the showers. The others present were the residents of the castle, like Foll and Selphy, guests like Chastille and Manuela, as well as the guest of honor, Orias. There were those acting shyly with bath towels wrapped around them, and those like Manuela brazenly exposing themselves. Nephy was on the shy side with a towel wrapped around her.

As she washed her body before getting in the bath, she could hear a terrifying explosion from outside. This time there wasn’t a need to confirm with anybody, as a tremor ran through the area. There was basically only one person who could cause such tremors within this castle without causing any damage to the castle itself.

“It seems that Master Zagan is angry. Did something happen, I wonder?”

“It’s just two gentlemen amusing themselves with one another. You can leave them be,” Alshiera said in exasperation. She was carrying a towel, but didn’t have it wrapped around her body. She had just arrived and appeared to be waiting for an open spot among the showers.

Would that mean he’s with Lord Barbatos? There wasn’t really anyone else who could take a hit that could cause the castle to shake. Nephy would’ve noticed if an Archdemon-class enemy had infiltrated the castle, and any other sorcerer would just be dead. Chastille grimaced upon coming to the same conclusion.

“Ummm, sorry for causing trouble after being invited here. I’m sure Barbatos did something.”

“Hmmm? And why do you need to apologize for him?” Manuela asked with a grin.

“Th-That’s because he’s my... I mean...!”

“Mmmm! Did you hear that? He’s my...!”

“I’m telling you you’ve got it wro—Hwah?!”

“You’re being noisy, Horse Head.”

Foll walked by and dumped water on Chastille’s head, causing her to spring up dramatically and fall over.

I suppose Chastille isn’t in work mode today. Nephy was quite

surprised at how gallant Chastille had been back when she'd gone to visit her at the church together with Zagan. She knew this girl was so level-headed that she was like another person when on duty, but she had gotten so familiar with Chastille's usual behavior that the mere idea that this was possible felt extremely out of place.

Foll then hurried over to Nephy with a pitter-patter.

"Nephy, I'm done washing. Can I get in now?"

"Yes. But don't run, okay? It's dangerous."

"Okay."

Foll appeared to be quite excited about the enormous bath and hopped right in.

"Ah! That's, like, totally unfair, little lady! I'm going in, too!"

"Hey! Selphy! Finish washing off the soap first! Geez..."

Incidentally, Lilith was the first to finish washing off and getting into the bath. She had a towel wrapped around her body, but her tail was poking out of the water and happily wagging about.

"Haaah, this is the best. His Highness really is sooo generous."

Lilith had a glass of juice floating in the water next to her and appeared to be enjoying herself to the fullest with a slight blush to her cheeks.

Now that I think of it, Master Zagan has somewhat of a soft spot for Lilith. Even though the construction of the grant bath was based on a combination of many reasons, the largest contributing factor was likely because of Lilith's request. It wasn't to the level that he spoiled Nephy, but she estimated it was somewhere around half the level he spoiled Foll. That was actually quite a large amount for Zagan.

He was, of course, likely taking into consideration that she was a normal civilian, but was there perhaps some other reason behind this? She was a little curious. And, as Nephy continued observing her, Selphy swam up to Lilith with her legs back in their fish form.

"Lilith, what flavor do you got there?"

"Hey, I drank out of that one already..."

"Awww. Come on. I'll give you some of mine, too."

"Hwah? Th-That's like an i-i-i-i-indirect..."

"You okay? You're totally red, ya know?"

They looked like they were having fun in their own little way. The next to get in the bath were Kuroka and Kuu.

"Must be nice not to have your hair get all messed up by the bath, huh, Kuroka?"

"Is that so? Your hair looks so pretty, Kuu."

"No, I mean your tails. Kuu's tail shrivels up when it gets wet."

"I think that's cute in its own little way. Don't wring it out in the bath..."

Kuu was somewhat dissatisfied with her tail and was wringing it

out like a rag. Elsewhere, Gremory was washing Orias' back.

"Eheheh, does it itch anywhere, Master? I'll be doing my best to let you relax today."

"What's with that coaxing tone? It's gross, just speak as you always do."

The trembling Gremory was in her form as a beautiful woman, while Orias was in her young Oberon form.

Nephy had asked why she did so out of curiosity, and she simply replied, "Is there any woman out there who would bare such aged skin when they're capable of becoming younger?" A woman's heart was complicated even in old age. It was entirely possible the day would come when Nephy would feel the same way. That thought was somewhat frightening, though, so she shook her head to forget about it.

Shall I have Mother teach me the sorcery to manipulate my age...?

Incidentally, Gremory already had a large lump on her head from being scolded. That was perhaps why Orias showed no signs of reproaching her any further. Nephy actually wanted to be the one to wash Orias' back, but with Gremory as cornered as she was, she decided to yield that role to her.

And as she watched the two older ladies, Nephy finished washing herself off. She then noticed that Alshiera was still standing in place.

"Miss Alshiera, would you like me to wash your back? It's become less crowded over here."

Alshiera hesitated for a moment, but quickly nodded.

"Then please do, Lady Nephy."

"Of course."

Alshiera plopped down in front of Nephy. The Night Clan did not possess beating hearts. Perhaps because of that, her skin was quite pale, but nothing else looked different about her from a normal person.

"What would you like to do with your hair?" Nephy asked upon noticing that Alshiera's hair was still tied up to the sides.

"I suppose you can let it down."

"Very well."

Nephy undid her hair just as told, and gulped ever so slightly. Beneath them were two horns which had been smashed at their roots. She was likely waiting for the others to go into the bath because she didn't want them to be seen.

"Could you not make such a face?" Alshiera said with a curious smile. "They're wounds from a thousand years ago. It isn't troublesome to have them seen after all this time."

"Umm... Okay."

Alshiera then put her finger to Nephy's lips.

“However, this is a secret from the other girls, okay?”

“Yes...”

This was her own way of handing over some precious information.

A race with angled horns... The only ones Nephy knew of were dragons like Foll, fomorians like Gremory, and succubi like Lilith. They were all rare species. They also all shared a commonality of having golden eyes. Nephy felt like she had come across a major secret.

She went on to carefully wash Alshiera’s hair. As she rinsed off her back, she noticed that Alshiera was obstinately holding her towel to her chest. It was as if it was a substitute for the stuffed toy she usually carried around.

“I’ll wash off your back now.”

Nephy pretended not to notice and began rubbing Alshiera’s back.

This feels somewhat strange. She didn’t know quite how to put it. It felt like she was accomplishing her original goal of paying respects to her parents. Setting aside her age, Alshiera was only a little bigger than Foll, yet Nephy was still under that delusion. Was it because Alshiera had a very adult personality? As she cocked her head to the side, something else came into sight.

“Miss Alshiera, that...”

“Huh? Oh my...”

What looked like black blood ran to the floor along Alshiera’s leg. Taking a closer look, the towel she was carrying was dyed the same color. She seemed to be bleeding from the abdomen.

“I see, so this is how it gets in the bath. How careless of me.”

Alshiera smiled bitterly and snapped her fingers. As she did, several bats appeared in the air and were sucked into her wound as if to seal it up.

“That should hold long enough to take a bath.”

“...Is this from back then?”

Nephy had first met this girl in Atlastia, but when she’d reunited with her on that uninhabited island, Alshiera had been on the verge of death. Borrowing Zagan’s wording, the term “verge of death” was strange, but in any case, she’d been seriously wounded. At the time, Zagan had shared his own blood to heal her. However, she’d been far and away from a complete recovery.

Alshiera simply shrugged her shoulders like it wasn’t a big deal.

“I just suffered an embarrassing defeat, is all. It is nothing for you to worry about.”

“Is it painful?” Nephy timidly asked, to which Alshiera returned a shocked look.

“We of the Night Clan don’t possess a sense of pain like humans do, you know?”

“But...”

“I’m fine. It is nothing for you to worry about.”

It didn’t seem to be mere bravado.

“However,” Alshiera said as she once more put her finger to Nephy’s lips. “Please keep this a secret as well. It would spoil the party.”

“Understood.”

Nephy poured water down Alshiera’s shoulders once more. Alshiera then tied up her hair with her towel. This way she was capable of hiding her horns. The two then headed to the bath. They were supposed to be the last ones to get in, but Nephy noticed that someone was missing.

“Huh? Where’s Nephteros?”

“It seems she’s not feeling well. She did say that she would show up later, though,” Chastille answered with a grim expression.

“Is she alright...?”

“I wonder? There was apparently some trouble in town the other day and she’s been feeling unwell ever since. She doesn’t really get it herself...”

“Does it have something to do with those dreams she was having before, I wonder...?” Nephy muttered as she cast her eyes down. She had also heard about Nephteros’ dreams which seemed to be of the Demon Lord. She wasn’t seeing them anymore, but Nephteros had once been engulfed by the Demon Lord, even if only its residual thoughts. There was no telling what kind of after-effects it had on her.

“What about dreams?” Lilith asked curiously.

“That’s...”

“Lilith.”

That voice sent a shiver down even Nephy’s back. Alshiera squinted her golden eyes and once more put her finger to Nephy’s lips.

“You mustn’t pry into other people’s secrets.”

The air froze over, and Lilith trembled violently.

“Eep... Um, right...”

Nephy found this extreme reaction somewhat unexpected.

I didn’t think she was one to phrase things so strongly. But as that thought crossed her mind, she immediately realized the reason for that.

“You really are kind, Miss Alshiera,” she said with a grand smile.

“How did you get that impression just now?” Alshiera asked as she knit her brows, to which Nephy smiled once more.

“You said that out of concern for Lilith’s safety, correct? Dreams are her territory, after all.”

Lilith was the princess of the succubi, and dreams were their specialty. Someone with Lilith’s level of power could surely step into

anybody's dreams. However, Lilith wasn't a sorcerer, and she possessed no fighting ability. That's why Alshiera warned her not to stick her neck into anything dangerous.

The way she put it was a little mean to Lilith, though... Moreover, this came up from Nephy's slip of the tongue. It turned out that Nephy was pretty much right on the mark, seeing that Alshiera's face turned quite red.

"Umm, were you... worried about me, My Lady?" Lilith timidly asked.

"Like I know!"

Alshiera huffed to the side and plunged her head under the water. Zagan had demonstrated this once before, but this girl really was bad at accepting honest gratitude. She was actually quite cute like this.

Just then, the door to the grand bath opened. It was Nephteros. She didn't seem to have much aversion to exposing her skin and was only holding up a towel at her chest.

"Nephteros, are you feeling better now?" Nephy asked.

"Oh... Mmm... I'm a little better."

Nephteros awkwardly scratched her cheek, then cast her gaze over to Nephy and Orias.

"Were you, perhaps, waiting for me?"

"Yes. We can't begin without you, after all."

"...I'll wash myself quickly, so just wait a bit."

"What's this about?" Orias asked curiously.

"Umm, please wait a moment longer, Mother."

"Well, okay."

By the time Nephteros entered the bath, Nephy had passed around glasses and trays to float them upon. Nephy and Nephteros nodded to each other, then poured Orias' drink for her together.

"Your preparations are quite thorough, aren't they?" Orias said with a blank look.

"Yes."

After confirming that everyone had their drink, Nephy held her own glass out and cleared her throat.

"Thank you to everyone who has come all the way from Kianoides to join us on this occasion. Also, thank you to all of you who aided in the grand bath's construction. We were capable of completing it today because of all your efforts."

This was a celebration for the grand opening of the baths. She was being a little formal, but it had to be said, so Nephy briefly made her speech and held up her glass.

"Then to celebrate the completion of the grand bath, and to show our thanks to my mother. Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

This left Orias completely wide-eyed in shock. She then smiled in a troubled manner.

"I thought you were being awfully distant today. So this is what it was for..."

There was no way she was unhappy about this. Orias held up her glass with a slight blush to her cheeks.

"I don't recall doing anything that requires such gratitude, but thank you."

It was somewhat strange to have a mother who looked the same age as her, but Nephy didn't know Orias long enough to feel anything out of place from that. Perhaps because of this, it felt like she'd made a new friend. And, as Nephy and Nephteros exchanged smiles, Foll moved over next to Alshiera and whispered in her ear.

"Thank you, too."

"...Shhh."

Nephy couldn't really hear her and cocked her head curiously as Nephteros struck up a conversation with Kuroka.

"Oh right, Kuroka. About that sorcerer... Uhhh, Shax, was it? Did you make up with him yet?"

Now that Nephy thought of it, Nephteros had felt sick and hadn't come to the castle the day Kuroka had made up with him. Kuroka turned beet red and dipped her face into the bath.

"Umm... Yes."

"I see. Good for you."

Nephteros frankly gave her blessings, then looked over at the wall toward the men's bath.

"I wonder how things are going over there?"

"There should've been a celebration going on over on the men's side, too, so Shax and Raphael were over there, but..."

"There doesn't seem to be any sign of a scuffle over there yet," Kuroka said as she cupped her hands over her triangular ears. "But it doesn't sound like a celebration either."

"...Oh, mm." Nephteros had also been present during the incident with Kuroka's underwear. "Then I suppose Richard will get caught up in it. How pitiful."

"Please give him my thanks after this, Nephteros," Nephy said.

"Will he be pleased by getting it from me?"

"Yes! Have some confidence and be kind to him."

Nephteros was overawed by Nephy's unusually vigorous advice and nodded back to her.

"G-Got it."

Just then, Kuroka's ears twitched about.

"Oh, Mister Shax and Kimaris are talking about something."

"Hmmm? Hey Kuroka, can you relay what they're saying? Come

on.”

“Comrade Manuela, that fool Kimaris has nothing interesting to say in the bath.” Gremory then sidled up next to Kuroka. “More importantly! Little Shax might say something interesting, hmmm?”

Kuroka was quickly surrounded by the two fanatics and was left at a complete loss.

“Kuroka, you can tell them you don’t want to, okay?”

“Auu... but...”

Gremory and Manuela were getting heated up over potential love power and reduced Kuroka to a trembling mess. And seeing them run wild like that, Nephy plopped her hands on their shoulders.

“You two aren’t forcing her, are you?”

“...No, we’re not.”

Both of them made a cramped smile and quietly backed down. Kuroka finally felt relieved, but she suddenly raised her face and turned remarkably red.

“Hmhmm? What’s this? Did you hear something?”

“Tell us everything! My liege’s barrier is too strong here and I can’t eavesdrop!”

It turned out that sorcery was completely sealed within the bathing area. However, Kuroka’s abnormal sense of hearing was a natural ability, so it couldn’t be blocked by Zagan’s absurd barrier. Even Kuroka’s human ears turned red as she covered her face.

“No... That’s a little...”

“Just speak. It’ll get easier if you do.”

“Quickly! Quickly!”

Nephy felt a headache coming from the two highly stimulated fanatics. Incidentally, Orias seemed to be casting aside her role as Gremory’s teacher while she drank, and showed no signs of stopping them. She did look exasperated, though. Kuroka peeked out between her fingers, then gave in to their passion.

“Ummm, he’s saying stuff like... She glosses it over all the time, but she’s a nice person at her core.”

“So sweeeeet! What sweet love talk! We need some hard liquor!”

“Love power is overflowing! Seconds! I need seconds!”

Manuela clenched her fist, and before anyone knew it, she was holding out a liquor bottle asking for more instead of a glass. Taking a closer look, Nephy could spot an empty glass and bottle on her tray. When did she manage to drink so much?

Gremory’s eyes were shining with a fiery blaze. She looked like she was about to have a nosebleed at any moment.

“He said she always tries to protect the weak, so... he gets really worried, and wants to protect her...”

“Hnnngh! Nephy! Do you have something drier? It’s too sweet!”

“Keeheehee. Despite being such a blockhead, he’s completely head over heels, isn’t he? Good! So good!”

And just then, Nephy felt something out of place.

Kuroka is speaking as if it doesn’t involve her at all considering this is Sir Shax... Having said that, she didn’t believe Shax would point such feelings toward anybody else. She was pretty sure she could make that declaration absolutely. Meaning...?

And as if to affirm that out-of-place feeling...

“Miss Gremory is charming like that, so he’s stayed with her for the last 60 years, he said...”

“...Huh?”

Gremory turned into a statue, and Kuroka submerged herself under the water and covered her triangular ears as if she couldn’t listen anymore. She had summarized it a fair bit, but she surely heard far more details than that. She looked like a boiled octopus.

As for Manuela, it seemed she had noticed halfway through. Her mouth was twisting and she was trembling as if she was holding back a huge laugh. And that’s when Orias decided to join the conversation.

“Aah, so it’s already been 60 years since then. My idiot disciple who suddenly ran away came back with a small leonin asking me how to teach someone to read and write.”

“Stoooooooooooooooooop!”

Gremory turned so red that she had tears in her eyes as she lunged at Orias. But her opponent was an Archdemon. She was repelled in midair and sank to the bottom of the bath. Modest laughter broke out over the women’s bath.

But she’ll drown if we leave her like that, right? Sorcery couldn’t be used in the bath, so Nephy pulled Gremory out. Manuela also felt somewhat responsible and helped her. And yet, there was one person there who froze up as if remembering a certain trauma.

“Chastille? Is something the matter?”

Her gaze was nailed to Orias.

“...Umm, you’re Lady Orias, right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I may just be imagining things, but we haven’t met before... have we? Ahahaha...”

For some reason, Orias clearly hesitated to answer her. And upon seeing this, Nephteros cut in.

“Haven’t you met at the church or something? Mother...?”

Nephteros looked over to Orias to see if it was alright to mention and continued after getting a nod from her. “Mother goes by the name Oberon in the church, after all.”

“Oberon... As in Lady Oberon...? Now that you mention it, I did feel something out of place when speaking with her...”

Orias once more averted her gaze. It was apparently true they had met in the past. Nephy shuffled over to her mother and began whispering to her.

“What actually happened?”

“...Umm, I taught that girl how to use a sword a little when she was a novice.”

“Isn’t it fine to tell her that?”

Orias shook her head.

“Um, I didn’t hold back enough, and apparently... blew away her memories of the time.”

Both Nephy and Nephteros were left speechless by this.

Chastille must have had it tough as a child... But this had her fully convinced now. Chastille likely had it tough enough to line up right next to Zagan for having the most difficult childhood. She had wondered why a girl still in her teens was capable of wielding a sword like that, but it turned out it was from the personal instruction of the legendary Angelic Knight Oberon.

There were surely things one was better off forgetting, so Nephy picked up a liquor bottle and offered some to Chastille.

“Chastille, this is some unusual liquor we ordered from Liucaon. Would you like some?”

“Huh? Is that so? I haven’t really had much liquor before. Will I be okay?”

She likely wouldn’t be, considering how high the alcohol concentration in this liquor was, but she still seemed interested, so Nephy poured some in her cup, and Chastille took a drink.

“Hmm, this goes down pretty easily and tastes great! My body also feels nice and warm from it. Nephy, could I have another?”

“Of course.”

And after a couple more cups, Chastille was completely smashed and passed out.

“Geez. You gave her too much, Nephelia.”

“I thought Chastille was better off forgetting this matter.”

The two of them carried Chastille out of the bath and put her down next to Gremory. Orias also felt somewhat guilty about this and carried a new towel over to her. And seeing her like this, Nephy strained a smile.

“You have all sorts of faces, Mother.”

She was truly glad for this party even if this was the only thing she learned from it.

“None of them good though,” Orias replied with a grimace.

“That’s not true. I want to know more about you.”

Just then, Zagan’s profile from the other day came to mind.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing...”

Nephy vaguely smiled, but then realized it was unfair to keep quiet when she wanted to know more about her mother herself.

“Um, I’m truly happy to have been able to meet you, Mother. But...”

She wasn’t sure whether it was alright to say this. But even so, Nephy mustered her courage and put her doubt into words.

“I was just thinking of what sort of people Master Zagan’s parents were.”

Marc had begun the search for him because of something to do with Zagan’s parents. And then there was the possibility that Marc was the Pope. So who exactly was it who could put the Pope in action?

“That’s certainly an interesting question,” Orias replied with a nod. “So, who were they?”

And all gazes naturally gathered on Alshiera.

“It’s troublesome if you ask me, though?” she said in a regretful tone.

“But were you not the one to urge Zagan to chase after this Marc person? There’s nobody else we can ask.”

It was certainly true that Alshiera was likely the only one who had any chance of knowing of Zagan’s birth. Stella, Barbatos, and even Zagan himself had no way of knowing those details. And of all people, it was Foll who jumped to Alshiera’s defense.

“The bath is fun. It’s no good to force her while we’re having fun.”

Those innocent words brought everyone back to their senses. Orias also combed back her bangs with a strained smile.

“I suppose my granddaughter is correct. We may have gotten a little carried away. Please forget I said anything.”

With that, she returned to the bath. Nephy and Nephteros followed her in. After thinking it over for a little, Alshiera tipped her wine glass slightly and muttered quietly.

“I certainly was acquainted with his father.”

Nephy was left wide-eyed in shock. She never thought Alshiera would actually answer.

“Alshiera, is this okay?” Foll asked in a worried tone.

“It may just be appropriate for some idle chatter to go along with our drinks. Besides, I may just be making things up.”

Alshiera giggled, but nobody laughed with her. Two people were already unconscious, but the remaining women in the bath gathered around Alshiera. And, with all attention on her, she began speaking of the matter nostalgically.

“Now where to start...? Oh yes, that’s right. We really should start with you.”

For some reason, she cast her gaze over to Kuroka.

“Huh? Me...?”

“Kuroka, that man is the former owner of your Moonless Sky.”

More points are beginning to connect... And not only that, but in ways Zagan likely couldn't even predict. This had everyone completely shocked, including the girls from Liucaon.

“Please wait a moment, My Lady. Does that mean His Highness is from Liucaon?”

“You could say that, in a sense. But you could also say he isn't. Well, just think of him as somewhat related.”

She sounded awfully evasive, but this was on the clearer side of things coming from Alshiera.

“He was a very strong and splendid man,” she continued in a charmed tone. “He fought far in front of anyone else, and he would truly come out victorious in the end no matter how badly the odds were stacked against him.”

This was surely a precious memory to her. Nephys felt like Alshiera was crying as she spoke of this.

“Um, could we ask what his name was?” she timidly asked.

Alshiera fell silent, hesitating whether to answer, but eventually spoke up.

“That man didn't desire his name to be left behind. That's why I'm unable to speak it. However, he's also known as...”

Alshiera spoke that name as if atoning, and as if in grief.

“_____”

The bath fell dead silent. That name was perfectly obvious, in a sense. In fact, Alshiera had referred to him as such when she first met Zagan in Liucaon.

“How surprising. This is truly surprising. To think the day would come where I could meet you once more.”

And that person had likely already...

Nobody said anything. And before long, Alshiera quietly got out of the bath.

“I spoke a little too much. I'm going to go enjoy the night breeze.”

“Lady Alshiera,” Orias called out. “It was a wonderful story. Next time, let us share a drink between the two of us.”

“With you? By all means.”

Thus, Alshiera left the bath behind.



Some time earlier.

The fight between Barbatos and Zagan, which began with trying to stop Barbatos from peeking on the women's bath, had moved deep into the forest some distance away from the castle.

Dammit, Barbatos! He's really hanging in there! Zagan never thought he'd survive after having gone as far as using Heaven's Phosphor. He didn't really want to admit it, but this man possessed power on par with him. It was entirely reasonable to assume he would become an Archdemon and stand in Zagan's way if only there was an open seat.

Well, here he was using his tremendous power to try and accomplish something as inane as peeking on the women's bath, so perhaps the seat of an Archdemon was still far away for him.

"...Hmph. Hey, Barbatos. It's about time to end this."

Having said that, this futile fight had already gone on for two to three hours. It was pretty likely that Nephy and the others were closing up their party already. Meaning time was up. Zagan was using sorcery while fully intent on killing Barbatos, and he had managed to survive right until the time limit. In that sense, this was a draw.

Why's he such an idiot when he's got so much power? It was endlessly confusing.

"Haah, fuck." Barbatos sighed and collapsed to the ground. "I couldn't win this time, either."

"How about you learn your damn lesson already?"

"Can it. I'll definitely kill you next time."

Their fight may have started for a stupid reason, but it was possible Barbatos' goal of peeking had vanished halfway through. Although, they may have gone a little too wild. An Archdemon and a sorcerer right beneath that came to serious blows. The trees around them had been mowed down and fissures ran across the ground.

A civilian was likely to have an accident if they wandered into such a place, but it wasn't just a matter of returning the trees to where they were. The thought of having to deal with all this was giving Zagan a headache, but that could wait. He gave Barbatos a light kick.

"Hey, get up, already. The party I went out of the way to throw has gone by because of you. Let's drink."

"Don't fuck with me. Like I can drink anything after having my stomach ruptured."

Zagan had driven his fist full force into Barbatos' belly several times, so he likely wasn't lying. He wasn't done repairing the damage, and even his cursing seemed unenthusiastic.

I hope that idiot Shax managed to survive... Zagan had called Kimaris over just in case, so in the worst case, Shax probably hadn't been killed. And just as he was about to start heading back to the castle...

"Teeheehee. Keeheehee. Aah, alas, we finally meet."

A sweet and eerie voice resounded through the air.

That's... not Alshiera. Who is this? A cold dread ran down his spine, and Barbatos jumped back up to his feet. There was a shadow there

that had the form of a person. There were two golden eyes like moons where its head was. The state of the trees and ground in the area didn't lend itself to walking through, so where did this shadow come from? It was as if it had descended from the skies.

Before all that, even though they had run wild, this was still within Zagan's barrier. It was impossible to trespass without him noticing—so long as there wasn't a significant gap in power, that is.

“...Hey, Zagan. This ain't something you set up, right?”

“Don't be stupid. Isn't it one of your acquaintances? It looks an awful lot like your disgusting shadows.”

Zagan felt like he would be forced to shrink back if he didn't keep his mouth moving. The shadow gave him a sense of *déjà vu*. It looked completely different, but it somehow reminded him of the residual thoughts of the Demon Lord that Bifrons had once summoned in the form of sludge. It was questionable whether it was capable of conversation, but it did speak just now, so Zagan gave it a warning.

“Hey, who the hell are you? What are you doing here?”

He prepared multiple spells within his hand as he spoke. Thanks to the idiotic scuffle with Barbatos, he didn't have much sorcery left at the ready. His warning was also a means of buying time to prepare himself fully. Barbatos also looked like he was getting ready to disperse and was in the middle of constructing his path into Purgatory.

As they prepared themselves while keeping a careful eye on the shadow, they noticed it was suddenly holding what looked like two swords.

Was it holding those from the very beginning? If not, that meant Zagan couldn't see the moment it drew its blades. He corrected his cognition of this shadow as a threat on par with an Archdemon.

Its golden eyes rolled about and focused on him.

“...Tch. What a pain.”

He was shaken by feelings of fear, disgust, and uneasiness in an instant.

Is this a type of a magic eye? This'll be troublesome... He didn't receive much of a shock from it because he had strengthened his spirit, but most people would lose consciousness from carelessly looking into those eyes. Just standing off against them now was shaving away at his willpower.

“I found it. I found it,” the shadow said as it laughed once more. “My beloved Master's heart.”

Zagan felt a chill run through his entire body.

This thing's aiming for the Sigil of the Archdemon! Moreover, it seemed to know the meaning of the Sigil. Right around then, Zagan finished his preparations.

Sorry, I'm not so optimistic that I'd expect to hold a conversation with a monster. He had black flames at the ready in his hand. These were the flames that burned life itself. All five of them lit up and turned into blades as he swung his arm.

“Heaven’s Phosphor Fivefold Grand Flower.”

This was the strike that once obliterated the demon Orias summoned. It was the ultimate prohibited spell among all his trial runs which boasted of the greatest speed and power. The blades fired forth from Zagan’s fingers and charged at the shadow from five different directions.

“Keeheehee. Eeheehee. Do you like to waltz?”

The shadow leaped towards one of the blades and thrust out the sword in its hand to cut it down.

Fast...! but it's useless! Even just one blade was capable of piercing a demon’s armor. He didn’t know what kind of famed blade it was wielding, but it wasn’t possible for it to deflect Heaven’s Phosphor.

Or, it wasn’t supposed to be able to. A clear clang rang through the air as a blade shattered. Not the shadow’s sword, but Heaven’s Phosphor.

“Impossible...”

But there were still four more blades. They would chase down the shadow even if it managed to evade them. And yet, the shadow swung the swords in its hands around as if dancing. A second, then third blade of Heaven’s Phosphor was intercepted. The flowing stream of sword strikes swiftly brought down all five blades. Zagan’s mind could barely keep up.

He considered the possibility of some demon being capable of withstanding it. He also considered the possibility of someone like Barbatos being able to evade them by teleporting through space. His sorcery wasn’t flawless. He wasn’t that conceited. However, who in the world could imagine it being struck down head-on?

The Fivefold Grand Flower brought certain death precisely because it came in from five directions at once. And this shadow had managed to fend off all five blades using only defensive sword strikes. Not only that, but it also did so when first witnessing the attack. That proved it was faster than Zagan’s sorcery.

“Hey! Zagan!”

He had frozen up for just an instant at having his ultimate attack broken. However, the shadow had closed the distance between them completely in that single instant. The swords in its hands closed in on Zagan’s throat.

I can't dodge it...! The moment he thought so, the ground vanished beneath his feet. His body was sucked in with a jerk, and the blades terrifyingly grazed his nose. In the next instant, he was standing next

to Barbatos a fair distance away from the shadow.

“Burst! Obsidian Needles!”

At Barbatos’ command, countless needles shot out of the shadow—the path to Purgatory he’d opened—where Zagan was standing a moment ago. The shadow had just finished swinging its sword and was unable to dodge. Its entire body was skewered by the needles.

“Eeheehee. My dress is ruined. Do you hate to waltz?”

The shadow swung its swords while still pierced all over. Barbatos’ Obsidian Needles all crumbled away just like Heaven’s Phosphor.

“You’re kidding me. Is this thing fucking immortal?”

Just then, the moon peeked through the clouds. Perhaps because of the damage it had taken, the shadow which enveloped the mysterious figure cleared up, and its identity was made clear. Zagan doubted his eyes upon seeing its face.

“Impossible... Why are you...?”

It had two scimitars in its hands. Its dress was in tatters. And it looked like a young girl around 14 or 15 years old who had the same face as Lisette. However, her expression didn’t look anything like she normally did. Shad had a broken smile and her head was inclined at an unnatural angle.

“...So she was eaten. How pitiful.”

Zagan saw through this in an instant. This was no longer the pitiful girl who was trembling in fear after having fought Kuroka. That girl had already vanished. The one here was nothing more than an empty husk being manipulated like a marionette.

He had never even spoken to the girl. She was an enemy. But he still sympathized with her. The only thing Zagan could do for her now was at least put her at ease.

But... She’s strong... Zagan’s Fivefold Grand Flower was self-explanatory, but even Barbatos’ Obsidian Needles was an attack that could reach an Archdemon. And here both had been completely useless.

Then there were those two scimitars. There was probably some sort of power wrapped around them, but just the mere fact that they’d struck down Heaven’s Phosphor meant all of her attacks were as strong as Heaven’s Phosphor itself.

“How admirable of you to save me, Barbatos.” Zagan put on a strong front as he laughed.

“...Haaah, don’t screw around. Who’d want to save your ass? If you go and lose, the crybaby’s gonna be next. She can be kinda dumb and all. She’ll pick a fight even if she can’t win. Definitely.”

That girl was a proud Archangel. She would fight so long as there was somebody to protect. That’s why Barbatos couldn’t afford to

retreat. Zagan finally understood why this man had resolved himself so much for this fight.

“I see, this isn’t some rabble I can look down on arrogantly and trample underfoot. It’s an enemy I must devote my entire soul to take on.”

He couldn’t fuss over small things like how it was shameful to rely on arts or that he wanted to fight with sorcery. This was an enemy he had to struggle wretchedly against just to face off against it in desperation.

Zagan undid his mantle’s clasp and threw it to the ground. This mantle could be considered to be a sorcerer’s fortress, inlaid with a multitude of sorcery for protection. It was a foolish move to throw it away in front of an enemy. But Zagan dared to do so.

This is useful when using sorcery, but it’s just a hindrance when it comes to using arts... He couldn’t afford to be defeated here. If he took a step back here, Nephy, Foll, and all of his subordinates would be in danger. That’s why he had no other choice but to step forth and grasp victory.

“So? You have a plan or something?” Barbatos asked.

“Like I could have anything that convenient. All I can do is swing my fists until they hit, just like always.” However, he didn’t weave his sorcery around his fists. It was his feet which were fully armored in mana. “How about you? Can you keep up with me?”

“Haah, I can pretty much read your damn mind. Don’t worry your stupid little head over such trivial crap.”

Zagan was able to smile naturally at his annoying, yet reliable, undesirable friend.

“Then let’s do this. This is an enemy we must stake our lives on repelling.”



“Aristella” charged in. Her aim was Zagan, or more specifically, the Sigil on his right hand. Her speed far surpassed Zagan’s sorcery, so any defenses he could try to put up wouldn’t make it in time. And yet he took a step forward.

His foot, which was already fully clad in mana, tore apart the bedrock with that single step. His body accelerated to the very limits of his own perception. Even with the eyes of a sorcerer, and in a situation where he wouldn’t even blink, Barbatos was unable to capture Zagan’s movement. His charge left all sound behind him and was even ahead of his very own shadow.

“Heaven’s Wheel Shadow Sever.”

Light broke out of the same color as Heaven’s Scale. However, this spell wasn’t one which infinitely devoured all mana around it. Its

fundamental structure in devouring mana was the same, but it focused all of its intensity into propulsion.

With this, Zagan was able to keep up with “Aristella’s” movements for the very first time. However, just keeping up didn’t mean his fist could connect. That’s because her sword strikes could even completely overwhelm the Fivefold Grand Flower. Zagan’s fist would inevitably shatter upon coming in contact with them.

Arts are meant to overturn such inevitabilities! A child could overpower an adult. Iron armor could be crushed. Strikes flew faster than swords. Why was it possible for a fist to do so? What made arts different from simply swinging punches in a fight?

Zagan took another step forward. His extreme acceleration launched his body even further. “Aristella’s” sword cut through the air, and Zagan secured the optimal range for him to drive in his fist.

What was it that made arts different from a simple punch? It was the way one stepped in. Much like Kuroka’s Misty Night, or the way Decarabia fought, the fundamentals for defensive movements lay in how one’s legs were planted on the ground. The technique for changing that into a strike at the most optimal speed and drawing out the most optimal power was called arts. By the time “Aristella” stiffened up her body, it was already too late.

Zagan stomped on the ground. This time his explosive acceleration wasn’t focused on driving his body forward, but upward. His hardened fist lunged towards the sky as if his entire body were a single arrow.

“Ga—?!”

“Aristella” caught the fist with her scimitar, but her small body was blown into the air. She was now out of range. Even if he made full use of Shadow Sever, he couldn’t close the distance between them fast enough. But even so, Zagan paid no attention to that and took a step forward.

His foot sank into the ground, or more specifically, into the shadows. Immediately after that, Zagan was behind “Aristella.” His fist was already mid-strike by the time she turned around. The scimitars she used to try and block it were blown out of her hands.

“Obsidian Needles!”

Zagan and “Aristella’s” movements already surpassed Barbato’s perception. But nevertheless, he launched Obsidian Needles with perfect timing. These two had quarreled for over ten years. They still exchanged blows even after Zagan had become an Archdemon. That’s why they knew each other’s habits, tricks, and thoughts. “Aristella’s” dainty body was pierced by the needles.

“Hak!”

She coughed up pitch-black blood. This was not the blood of a

living creature. But even so, this wasn't enough to defeat her. It was questionable if she even took any damage to begin with.

However, this is enough for me. Black flames once more wrapped themselves around Zagan's fingers. He could've fired them into the air like this, but there was no need to weave his spell around his fingers if that was his goal. That's because the original purpose of this spell was to slam his fist directly into his target with the flames still charged within his hand.

"Aristella" had lost her scimitars. Her movements were at a momentary stop due to Obsidian Needles piercing her body. And that was enough time for Zagan to weave Heaven's Phosphor together. And, just as he was about to finish off this pitiful doll...

"Stop! Please! Don't kill Aristella!"

He hesitated upon hearing a bloodied scream.

"Keeheehee, what a naughty child!"

His hesitation gave "Aristella" the opportunity to escape. The Obsidian Needles looked like they were being eaten away by bugs and crumbled to bits. Zagan's fist charged with the Fivefold Grand Flower could no longer reach her. Instead, he ate a terrifying roundhouse kick.

"Gah!"

"The hell are you doing, Zagan?!"

His body tumbled to the ground and was swallowed by Barbatos' purgatory before appearing once more right next to him, having ignored all laws of momentum. By that time, "Aristella" had already regained her scimitars.

What was that voice just now...? He looked for the voice's owner and saw a girl wearing a breastplate staggering toward them. This was Dexia, the other twin.

"Please... don't kill... Aristella... It's... my fault... she ended up like that... So please..." Dexia collapsed. But even so, she continued talking in delirium. "I know... I'm being selfish... But please... save..."

This girl pleaded with Zagan with tears, snot, and mud all over her face.

"Hey, don't get any stupid ideas. That's impossible. It's too late. We're gonna be the ones to get done in if you try something so naïve."

Barbatos was right. That's why Zagan nodded.

"Of course. Let's finish this."

Zagan clenched his fist and ignored Dexia. It seemed she'd used the last of her strength to plead with him. She could no longer do anything but wheeze on the ground.

The same trick won't keep on working. He had to use everything at his disposal just to reach his target.

"Shadow Sever."

Zagan kicked off the ground once more. “Aristella” swung her scimitar. However, he had already seen through her swordsmanship. Zagan took one more step and slipped past the blades. But “Aristella” surely knew he would do so as well. The other scimitar was closing in on him exactly where he stepped forward.

Advancing isn't all there is to kicking off the ground! His next step aimed into the air. His explosive stride surpassed the speed of sound, and now it was charged into a kick. His foot collided with the scimitar. A sharp clang rang through the air and half the blade broke off. However, there was still one more scimitar.

Zagan's kick used grand motions and left him open. As such, he once more sank into Purgatory. Even if “Aristella” had a read on Zagan's movements, she couldn't read Barbatos' sorcery. Zagan reappeared directly above her this time. Purgatory's gate opened in mid-air using the shadow of the broken blade which was dancing in the air.

Zagan already had the Fivefold Grand Flower charged in his fist. However, Aristella was no longer looking at Zagan. It wasn't that she couldn't follow his movements. Her eyes were focused on the fallen Dexia.

“Tch! Western Sky! Eastern Sky!”

He transformed the already-completed Fivefold Grand Flower into his invincible shield.

“Wha—?! You dumbass!”

It naturally took a moment for him to do so. And using that opening, “Aristella's” golden eyes looked up at Zagan, and the scimitar in her hand thrust up toward him.

I'm one hand short! This would end with both their deaths. Just as he resolved himself to that...

“You owe me one, okay? Archdemon Zagan.”

Immediately following that, an invisible mass of mana slammed into “Aristella.” Any normal sorcerer would've been crushed by that, but here the terrifying torrent of mana was only enough to stop her movements. Zagan didn't do this. Neither did Barbatos. It came from far above.

Bifrons...? They were surely peeking in on this fight. The Archdemon who couldn't be distinguished as either a boy or a girl was there looking down on them. However, this was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

“Seize her! Western Sky! Eastern Sky!”

The armored hands made of Heaven's Scale wrapped around “Aristella.”

“AAAAAARGH!”

Heaven's Scale devoured both mana and life to strengthen itself.

As such, the shadow which enveloped her body was devoured to extinction. And, captured in such a way, “Aristella” was nothing more than a little girl. She was only capable of struggling for a few seconds, and after letting out a shriek, the pitiful girl stopped moving.

And so, the fight with the mysterious assailant came to an end.



“Aristella...”

Dexia clung to her twin who was being pinned down by both Western and Eastern Skies. But who exactly was she now? Would she truly wake up as Aristella even if that shadow was gone?

Zagan looked up at the sky. He couldn’t spot Bifrons anymore. Was this also part of that Archdemon’s plans? Or was their goal something else? He didn’t feel like he had won in the slightest. Only a disgusting feeling remained which told him this wasn’t over yet.

“So? What do you plan on doing with this thing?” Barbatos asked.

Zagan had defeated it, but he still didn’t know what it was. It wasn’t even a problem of whether or not to save her. But still...

“She wasn’t looking at me when I was about to hit her with the Fivefold Grand Flower.”

Why was it that she looked at Dexia instead of her impending death?

Is there still a part of the twin inside that monster? And if such a fragment remained...

“If the possibility of saving her exists, I’d like to give her a chance.”

Zagan had kicked about the rabble a countless number of times. Of course, he had killed many of them, too. Even if he felt like he changed ever since meeting Nephy, he had tried to kill the Head Archangel brat just because he grated on his nerves a little. It was the height of hypocrisy for him to be acting like a saint after all that.

But even so, I met Nephy. His filthy life was blessed by a chance meeting with Nephy. That was why, even if he was a despicable villain, he wanted to at least give her one chance.

“You’re definitely gonna get yourself killed one day,” Barbatos said with a sigh.

“...Maybe.”

He still didn’t know whether or not she could be saved to begin with.

“Call Gremory and Shax. I can’t move from here, so I can’t treat her. But those two—”

And, just as he was in the middle of saying that...

“Aristella!” Dexia yelled in joy. It seemed Aristella was regaining consciousness. However, her eyes were golden, and she had a broken

smile on her face.

“Keeheeheeheehee!”

“Aristella” laughed in a shrill voice and started getting up, completely disregarding the Western and Eastern Skies pushing down on her. The sound of something tearing apart could be heard. Zagan could tell immediately what it was. “Aristella” was missing both her arms.

She tore off her own arms...! By the time he realized it, “Aristella” was already leaping in the air. Heaven’s Scale had already been used to restrain her. Shadow Sever had already been dispelled. Barbatos was in the middle of going to get Gremory and Shax and was unable to take action right away. There was nobody left who could stop her.

“How pitiful.”

A voice came from directly behind Zagan. “Aristella’s” body was torn apart at the torso with a wet splash. Her lower body was swallowed by a black sphere, while her upper body lost all its momentum and fell to the ground.

“Huh...?”

Dexia sat there dumbfounded, completely unable to understand what had happened. Zagan lowered his gaze and spotted an iron barrel sticking out under his arm by his waist. It was a Seraph Hunter, a weapon which possessed destructive power on par with Heaven’s Phosphor.

“Alshiera...”

He had no idea when she’d shown up, but there she was hugging her stuffed toy.

“*This* is my enemy. I’ll finish my own enemy off. That’s all there is to it.”

Her voice was endlessly arrogant, yet endlessly heartrending.

So I couldn’t even give her a chance... It wasn’t Alshiera’s fault. This was a result brought about by Zagan’s carelessness.

“No way...” Dexia’s fragile voice resounded through the air.

“You’re kidding... Aristella... Aristella!”

Dexia clung to the girl whose entire body from the chest down was now missing. Zagan felt like he couldn’t stand to watch them anymore. And just then, a mass of debris-like crystals covered the girl’s remains.

“Help me out if you have the time to cry.”

Zagan doubted his eyes. It was Bifrons. The crystals covering her body seemed to be healing her. They were acting as substitutes for her missing organs, which was pretty much all of them except for her heart.

“Aren’t you twins?” Bifrons rebuked the dumbfounded Dexia.

“Link your heart to her body and connect your souls. Her ego is

vanishing!”

“R-Right!”

Dexia connected her heart with Aristella’s using her mana. This wasn’t enough to resurrect her, but it was possible to temporarily use her body to sustain Aristella’s like this. However, Zagan wove together sorcery in his hand as he watched this shameless act.

I don’t know what you’re planning, but you were definitely the one to turn Aristella into that monster. It was absolutely Bifrons who sent those two into town, seeing that they were working together with Shere Khan. But judging from their state in town, the twins didn’t even know what they were supposed to be doing. So what was the purpose of sending them there? Everything made sense if it was to sacrifice them to that shadow.

I won’t miss at this range. If he drove the Fivefold Grand Flower in right now, even Bifrons would die. This was the chance to kill an enemy who would definitely bring harm to his subordinates. Letting this chance go wasn’t a choice for one who aimed to be a king. This was the time to strike mercilessly... but Zagan undid his sorcery.

This isn’t something a man should do. Zagan wanted to be a man Nephys could be proud of. He didn’t believe that a man who attacked a defenseless enemy from behind would be suitable for her. And seeing him withdraw, Alshiera pointed her Seraph Hunter at Bifrons.

“...Let them go.”

Zagan pushed down the weapon and stopped her.

“You’ll definitely regret it.”

It was the same warning his undesirable friend just gave him.

“Probably. You two are likely right. But I wanted to give her a chance.”

This was the reason Zagan didn’t kill Aristella to begin with. These two were in the middle of giving that vanishing girl one more chance. He couldn’t deny them. After finishing with their procedure, Bifrons stood up.

“Heh, I was totally on edge thinking you’d mercilessly kill me from behind.”

“...Hmph. We’re even, then.”

Zagan would’ve died if Bifrons didn’t stop “Aristella’s” movements at the time. The small Archdemon laughed as if that was the plan from the very beginning.

“Hehehe, you really can’t fight your blood.”

“What do you mean?”

Bifrons’ body crumbled into debris without answering. Both Dexia and Aristella also crumbled away. Despite the fact that his barrier was considerably damaged from the fighting, he had thought that Barbatos was the only sorcerer who could so boldly use teleportation within his

domain. And as he glared at that irritating scene play out, Bifrons and the twins vanished completely.

“You don’t have the caliber of a king, but one of a hero. That’s why you have the right to take part in the battle to come.”

That voice, which sounded full of hope, yet sounded like a curse, rode the wind and vanished into the air.

Epilogue

“I still don’t get what’s so great about baths.”

Zagan was soaking in the grand bath all on his own. After repelling “Aristella,” he had somehow managed to clean up the area. By the time he returned to the castle, the party had ended. He knew he would get back late just from his fight with Barbatos, so he had told his subordinates not to wait for him.

In any case, the main matters of concern between Nephy and Orias, and Raphael and Shax, had apparently gone well. Things turned out great, but soaking away the bad aftertaste of recent events all on his own felt somewhat inadequate. Well, it seemed he could expect the bath to heal his exhaustion, at least.

Zagan didn’t lose anything this time. He had managed to protect his subordinates and his plan to pay respects to the parents of the castle succeeded. Moreover, he managed to obtain information on the identity of the enemy he had to be most wary of. However...

I couldn’t save her... He didn’t really have any obligation to do so. But even if it was just a whim, Zagan wanted to save her. He wanted to, and he failed to do so. Moreover, someone else ended up covering for his mistakes. It left a tremendously bad aftertaste.

“...Haah.”

He couldn’t help but sigh. He didn’t want his subordinates to see him in such a pathetic state, so he had to put up the “No Entry” sign at the entrance to the men’s bath. He didn’t know who made it, but it was quite a sensible addition. And as he agonized over getting his feelings back in order...

“Excuse me, Master Zagan.”

The door to the bath clicked open.

Hm? Did the “No Entry” sign fail? Having said that, this was Nephy’s voice, in which case it was fine. There wasn’t anyone else in there, after all.

“Um, I thought I’d wash your back. May I come in?”

“Yeah, I don’t mi—”

And that’s when he finally realized his situation.

Huh? This is the bath and I’m a man and this is the men’s bath and Nephy’s a woman? Is that okay? Actually, baths are meant to be used while naked, so it isn’t weird that I’m naked, right? Wait, huh?

He was unable to process the chaos in his mind while making full

use of his intelligence as an Archdemon.

C-C-C-C-Calm down! Just because I'm naked doesn't mean Nephy is also naked! It was obvious that she would just be wearing her usual maid uniform with her sleeves rolled up or something. She just said that she wanted to wash his back, so she didn't need to be naked for that.

Zagan could normally stop the release of dopamine in his brain using sorcery, but he had set up a barrier here which prevented the use of sorcery. He was no exception to that.

Oh yeah, Marc once taught me breathing techniques to suppress pain. It was an art to soften pain, focus one's consciousness, and temporarily return to a normal state. Zagan went as far as using the arts which he was normally so reluctant to use just to regain his composure. And, finally, he turned to Nephy.

"Ummm, if you have already finished washing, then how about having a drink together?" she asked with a small tray in hand and nothing but a towel wrapped around her body.

"WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?!"

WAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH?! This may have been the very first time Zagan's inner voice matched exactly what he said. She had exposed more of her body when she wore that swimsuit back at the beach, but a far greater shock assaulted Zagan's heart from this sight. He unintentionally sat there staring at her, leading Nephy to turn red from her ears to her shoulders and all the way down to her thighs as she covered her face.

"Ah, um, uh, p-please don't stare."

"Oh, mm! S-S-S-S-Sorry!"

Zagan somehow managed to avert his gaze. His heart seemed on the verge of rupturing, and he wasn't able to keep his composure very well. Even his breathing techniques were powerless in this instant.

Huh? What's going on? Am I dying? Zagan was so shaken that he felt closer to death than ever. However, this wasn't due to fear, but from pure elation. He was completely unable to say anything in his panic. As he continued to break down, Nephy stood directly behind him.

"M-Master Zagan, may I sit next to you?"

"Huh?! Uh, u-um, y-yes! I'll allow it!"

"Thank you."

Nephy dipped her delicate toes into the bath, followed by her tender calf, dainty knees, and her slender thighs. Her skin above that was covered by a towel, but Zagan could see the distinct curves of her beautiful body from her shapely buttocks to her slim waist. She likely had her towel wrapped around her tightly so that it wouldn't fall off, but that pressed down tightly on her breasts, which actually made it

feel like they would pop out.

Her pure white hair spread out in the bath. She had apparently meant to tie it up, but had forgotten. She scooped up her hair in a fluster, which suddenly placed her face right next to Zagan's. She was bright red right to the tip of her nose, and endlessly charming.

Zagan was unable to understand what brought about this miracle. In any case, the one who was now in the bath right next to him was none other than Nephy. She looked back up, and their eyes met.

"Ah..."

Both of them averted their gaze as water splashed in the air.

"U-Uhh, the water's nice, isn't it?!" Zagan exclaimed.

"Y-Yes! It's a wonderful bath!"

Zagan didn't actually have a clue as to what made a bath good, but he felt like it was his duty to talk about something. Nephy was also so nervous that her voice cracked. She repeatedly looked up at Zagan then back down at the bath before eventually remembering what she had come here for in the first place. She took the tray she had brought with her and floated it in the bath.

"Hmm...?"

A small cup and Liucaon-styled ceramic liquor bottles rested atop it. These were both about half the size of what was typical on the continent. Nephy picked up a cup and shyly smiled.

"This is a famous liquor from Liucaon. Would you like some?"

"Uhh... Very well, I'll partake."

Zagan accepted the cup from her, and Nephy poured a transparent liquor into it. It had the slightest scent of yeast. There was a difference between the sweetness of liquor and the sweetness of desserts, but this here had a sweet scent to it that made him salivate. Zagan enjoyed the aroma for a while before noticing that Nephy was still holding the bottle. He thought it over for a bit, then looked at the tray, where he spotted one more cup.

"Um, will you join me for a drink?"

"...! Uhh, then, since you offered..."

Nephy accepted the cup from him with a reserved smile. Zagan received the bottle from her in exchange and poured it for her as well.

"What a marvelous aroma," she commented.

"Mm. It seems to be quite different from what we have on the continent. This isn't bad at all."

In fact, he quite liked it. Zagan held out his cup before taking a drink, and Nephy shyly held hers out in turn. A small clink resounded through the bath as they shared a private toast.



“Thank you for your hard work today, Master Zagan.”

“You too, Nephy.”

He drank the contents of the small cup in a single gulp. A hot sensation that completely contrasted its sweet aroma flowed down his throat toward his chest. But this was in no way unpleasant. On the contrary, it had him sighing in admiration.

Smoking tobacco from his kiseru pipe wasn't bad, but this liquor was exceptionally delicious. It was so good that it washed away all of the bad aftertaste that lingered from the day's events in but a single gulp.

Zagan leaned back against the side of the bath and looked up at the night sky, where a nostalgic crescent moon hung above him. The slight tingling of his limbs felt pleasant as he stretched out in the bath. A cool breeze flowed in through the gap in the rocks, which Kuroka had requested, and brushed against his flushed cheeks.

“I get it now. So, this is elegance. Not bad.”

He finally felt like he understood Lilith's insistence on how great baths were.

“Yes. It's very pleasant,” Nephy replied with a relieved smile.

And as Zagan stared into the night sky in a daze, Nephy hesitantly called out to him.

“Master Zagan.”

“What is it?”

“Actually, I heard about who your father was.”

Zagan nearly dropped his cup from the completely unexpected change in topic.

“How did you... Ooh, Alshiera, huh?”

“Yes. I'm surprised you could tell.”

“It just seems like there's nobody else who would know, is all,” he replied in a bored tone, leaving Nephy with a bitter smile.

“Should we speak of this later?”

“No, it's fine. Tell me,” he said, but then shook his head. “Hang on. How about this? Let's compare answers.”

“Compare answers, you say?”

“Yeah. I've got an idea about who he was myself after hearing about Marc. We'll confirm whether my guess is right on three.”

Zagan was in a playful mood, and Nephy smiled curiously.

“Understood. Then...”

“Mm.”

“One, two... The Silver-Eyed King.”

They were perfectly in sync. It was the name Alshiera so obstinately affixed to Zagan. Everything made sense if it was his father's nickname. That's why she was somewhat cooperative with

him.

“So, you figured it out?” Nephy asked with an understanding nod.

“I wasn’t sure, but considering his relationship with Marc and Alshiera’s way of referring to me, I couldn’t think of any other candidates.”

That girl never answered any of his questions, but that also narrowed down the choices in its own way. It had taken him three months to arrive at this answer, but he finally got there.

No matter what kind of man he was, it doesn’t change who I am. But even so, he was somewhat curious as to what kind of man he was and how he had lived.

“I also found something out just a short while ago,” Zagan quietly said as he poured a second round of drinks.

“What is it?”

It was a terrifying existence that hijacked Aristella’s body and completely broke Heaven’s Phosphor, which he had absolute confidence in. Zagan had arrived at an answer as to what exactly it was.

“Azazel... Alshiera and Marc’s lifelong enemy showed itself.”

“That is my enemy.”

Those words provided him the answer precisely because Alshiera was the one to say them when she was so stubborn about not speaking of Azazel’s identity.

The shadow was Azazel.

He could understand why Alshiera had told him not to chase after it. He would surely have lost if he was on his own. The reason he managed to survive was because his archenemies Barbatos and Bifrons had lent him their strength... and because Alshiera had cleaned up after him.

Moreover, he felt like Azazel was only manipulating Aristella’s body. That wasn’t Azazel itself. If that was only a fragment of its power, there was no chance that Zagan could defeat it. It really wasn’t the time to be paying Shere Khan any attention. It also explained Alshiera’s extreme training. He had to build up his own strength. But even so...

“Well, I suppose I’ll just enjoy the elegance of this bath for now.”

Zagan’s goal was neither to save the world nor inherit the Silver-Eyed King’s will. He just wanted to create a world where Nephy and Foll could live happily. That’s why he wanted to accept this momentary peace.

“Yes. I’ll keep you company,” Nephy replied with a gentle smile.

Zagan then timidly returned her gaze. He still couldn’t look her directly in the eyes, but he didn’t want this time with her to end. He then picked up the bottle on the tray and shook it about.

“Ummm, there’s still more liquor left. Shall we stay a while longer?”

Nephy shyly looked down at the bath.

“It’s none of my concern if you get dizzy, okay?”

Zagan assumed both of them had already gotten dizzy, but Nephy didn’t refuse him. And so, he yielded his body over to pleasant drowsiness that made it feel like the tension he had felt mere moments ago was all a lie.



“Haaah... Today’s really not been my lucky day. I didn’t even do anything wrong? I actually even saved someone.”

The one sighing in a truly fed up manner was none other than Bifrons. After retrieving Dexia and the nearly-dead Aristella, Bifrons retreated from Zagan’s castle and went straight to their hiding place where Shere Khan was waiting.

“...No way... Master... Shere Khan...?” Dexia muttered in despair.

Shere Khan had collapsed to the floor, and Andrealphus was standing over him. Just as he had declared, he came here to finish off Shere Khan while Bifrons had been absent for the last few days.

“U-Urgh...” Shere Khan groaned as he squirmed on the ground like a worm. He was still alive.

Well, it’s still troublesome for me if he dies. This was a good turn of fortune.

“Bifrons? Looks like it’s true that you’re working with Shere Khan.”

Andrealphus turned around. He had what looked like a sword from the church in hand. It was different from a Sacred Sword, but it still had Celestial carvings. It was surely capable of cutting through sorcery, which was a terrifying power within the hands of this Archdemon.

“Hehehe, you sure are cruel, Head Archdemon Andrealphus. Shere Khan can’t even fight anymore, so do you mind not killing him?” Bifrons said like a remorseful child.

Having said that, Shere Khan didn’t look like he had been struck down without putting up a fight. The hideout was in quite a state, and Andrealphus’ Anointed Armor was in tatters with signs of blood coming out of its cracks.

“Sorry, no can do,” Andrealphus said with a sigh. “It’s my job to finish this guy off. Well, I’ve got no business with you, so I don’t mind letting you go.”

“You won’t spare him even if I beg you?”

“Can it. I’ll give it some thought if you’ve got something to offer me, but I still can’t afford to let this guy live.”

Bifrons drooped their shoulders dejectedly.

“Haah... You truly are a boring Archdemon. Neutrality this, duty that... Is there a point in an Archdemon fussing over that stuff?”

“The world will crumble apart if there isn’t at least one Archdemon who worries about that crap, ya know? Old man Marchosias isn’t around anymore, and all.”

Bifrons earnestly nodded at the mention of that nostalgic name.

“Aah, Marchosias. The esteemed Eldest. He truly was great. It was so exciting to sneakily think up tricks behind that old man’s back.”

“...You’re quite twisted yourself, ya know?”

“That’s what it means to be a sorcerer. The sane ones are the anomalies.”

The more insane they were, the more fun it was. Even Bifrons’ ally, the crippled Shere Khan, was so fascinating that it had them shivering in excitement. And yet, the Archdemon before their eyes wasn’t interesting in the least. He was a boring man.

We really don’t need this guy. Bifrons looked up at Andrealphus like a student being scolded by their teacher.

“Let me ask you one more time. Could you spare Shere Khan? I still want to play with him a whole lot more.”

“You sure don’t learn. That’s a no.”

“...I see.”

Bifrons already knew the answer, but still completely lost interest and averted their gaze upon hearing it. Andrealphus remained in their sight, but they were no longer looking at him. Bifrons then held out their hand to the trembling Dexia.

“Come on, don’t just shiver in the corner there. We’re gonna save this girl, right?”

“B-But...”

She surely thought that she’d be killed if she moved. As such, Bifrons shrugged their shoulders with no other choice.

“Oh well. This isn’t really my style and all, but I do have a contract with Shere Khan, and it seems we need another Sigil of the Archdemon, so I guess this works out.”

“...What are you talking about?”

Andrealphus sensed something out of place and held his sword at the ready.

That’s why you’re boring. But even so, Bifrons spoke with the respect that those who inherited the title of Archdemon deserved.

“You certainly are strong. You can even say it’s cheating to wield both the Sigil of the Archdemon and a Sacred Sword. You truly do deserve to be considered the strongest. Unfortunately...” Bifrons swung their arm as if swatting a fly. “Simply being strong doesn’t really make you interesting.”

The sound of liquid bursting filled the air.

“You truly were boring to the very end. Zagan would’ve punched me without hesitation the very moment I began shamelessly begging for my life, you know?”

In fact, he came charging in at Bifrons just from being lightly teased back at the treasury. Bifrons truly couldn’t get enough of him precisely because he ignored all of their bargains and tried to crush them. Just a single moment’s carelessness would mean death. Just thinking of it made Bifrons want to play with Zagan.

The little Archdemon looked like they had completely forgotten about the enemy before them, but one of their arms was missing. Andrealphus looked down at his own body in wonder. Bifrons’ missing arm was right there. A childish hand was sticking out of his chest as if it had torn through his body and pierced his Anointed Armor from within. And in its grasp was his still-beating heart.

“Killing people really is boring, so I don’t like doing it. You can’t play with the dead, and above all else, it’s way too simple. What’s so fun about it?”

And with those last words, Bifrons crushed Andrealphus’ heart in their hand. The head of the Archdemons, the strongest Archangel, met his end ever so quickly.



Afterword

It's been a long time everyone. I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 10*. My name is Fuminori Teshima.

This time we're constructing a hot spring! But I've got a dilemma of my own with my kid wetting their bed at night when I'm supposed to be writing!

Anyway, this time we've got a drama CD going on sale with this volume. All the voice actors are so cool and cute and the best and (insert every other compliment here), so please give it a listen. The people at Comic Fire have also put together a manga for publicity, so please enjoy that as well!

I want to keep writing but I'm out of pages. One more thing! Volume 2 of the novelization of the super-popular anime *Frame Arms Girl* is going on sale on the last day of March.

Sorry for just blowing through this afterword, but allow me to offer my thanks to all parties. To my chief editor, K. To COMTA, Hako Itagaki, the editor for the manga, and everyone who worked on proofreading, publicity, and cover design. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands.

Thank you very much!

December 2019: In a Coffee Shop at the End of the Year —
Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Counting Up Idiots

“So anyway, the traitor was that asshole Valjakka.”

Zagan dug through his memories of Raziel after listening to Barbatos’ report.

“You mean the one who was with Chastille...? Oh, the guy who yelled at Raphael, right?”

“Like you ordered, I stopped at casting constraining sorcery on him, but don’t you think it’d be better to kill him?”

“That seems easier, but we can’t right now.”

“Huh? Isn’t now the best time to kill him? He’s Shere Khan’s mole, ya know?”

He had a point, but Zagan shook his head.

“Killing that man now will make the church no longer function correctly. You saw what the brats were like in there, right? Even with the Sacred Swords, they’re just barely on par with the three idiots.”

Correcting for the units of measurement, they were each one idiot.

“So you’re saying we can use that Valjakka guy?”

“No, if I had to say whether he was incompetent or capable, I’d definitely pick incompetent. But even so, he’s a little stronger than two of the three idiots put together.”

“I don’t really feel like he’d be all that useful like that? Well, I guess the power balance between sorcerers and the church would crumble, huh?”

Barbatos really was fast at catching on. However, Zagan let out a sigh for an entirely different reason.

“However, it’s said the Sacred Swords have a will, so why did they choose a man like him? His skills with a sword aren’t bad, but he’s nothing compared to Chastille or Raphael.”

“What? It’s that, ain’t it? From what we saw with Andrealphus, the seraphs are women, right?”

Barbatos made a confused face as he asked why he didn’t even know that much, leaving Zagan wide-eyed in surprise.

“What does their gender have to do with anything?”

“That’s why you’re such a brat. Sometimes a pissant with no redeeming features manages to catch a nice woman, right? It’s like they fall for how useless the guy is. They get a sense of superiority over how hopeless the guy is without them. Ain’t it the same thing

here?"

"That's amazing... There's a strange persuasiveness when you say it, like there's a weight to your words."

"Oh? You finally get how great I am? Well, worship me all you want, then."

Chastille really has it tough...

Zagan said nothing as he anxiously pondered over the poor Archangel's fate.

A Mother's Happiness

"Mother, what does this word... Oh, pardon me, *Teacher*."

Orias suddenly turned a strict gaze to her daughter Nephy's question. She had instructed Nephy that during their lessons on celestial mysticism, she was to treat her as a teacher rather than a mother.

If not, my cheeks will slacken the entire time.

As a matter of course, Orias also took on the form of an old woman. With her mimetic muscles in decline, her changes in expression were harder to perceive.

"Evlogia... It means blessing."

"What a wonderful word. I would like to bestow this word upon another."

Orias felt the sudden need to clasp her heart at her honest daughter's reaction.

How is she so pure after being raised in the village?

She really wanted to hug her tightly right there and rub her cheeks against hers.

"Rather than bestow blessing upon others, aren't you more likely to have it bestowed on you?" Orias' other daughter, Nephteros said.

"Huh? M-My relationship with Master Zagan has yet to..."

Nephy turned red right to the tip of her ears as Orias gazed on fondly.

Why don't you just get married already...?

Their relationship had already been approved by her mother, so why was the progress between them so slow?

"Nephteros, do you have any such love stories of your own?" Orias asked.

"Me? I have an interest, but I don't really know yet. Right now, it's more fun spending time with Chastille and yourself, Mother."

What are you trying to do to me by making me so happy?!

Orias nearly fell to her knees upon seeing her daughter's somewhat bashful smile.

"Hm... Now is a good time. Shall we call it a day?"

That was happiness she'd let go of by her own will. And yet, she obtained the chance to relish it in peaceful moments once more. Orias truly felt like her heart wouldn't be able to withstand it. Watching her like that, her two daughters whispered to each other.

"Mother seems to be having fun today as well, doesn't she?"

"She's always full of smiles. Well, I'm also happy about this."

That was a regular scene in the garden of Zagan's castle.



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10 An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume
by Fuminori Teshima

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